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STREET & SMITH'S

AUG. 18th.

Western Story

Magazine

EVERY WEEK

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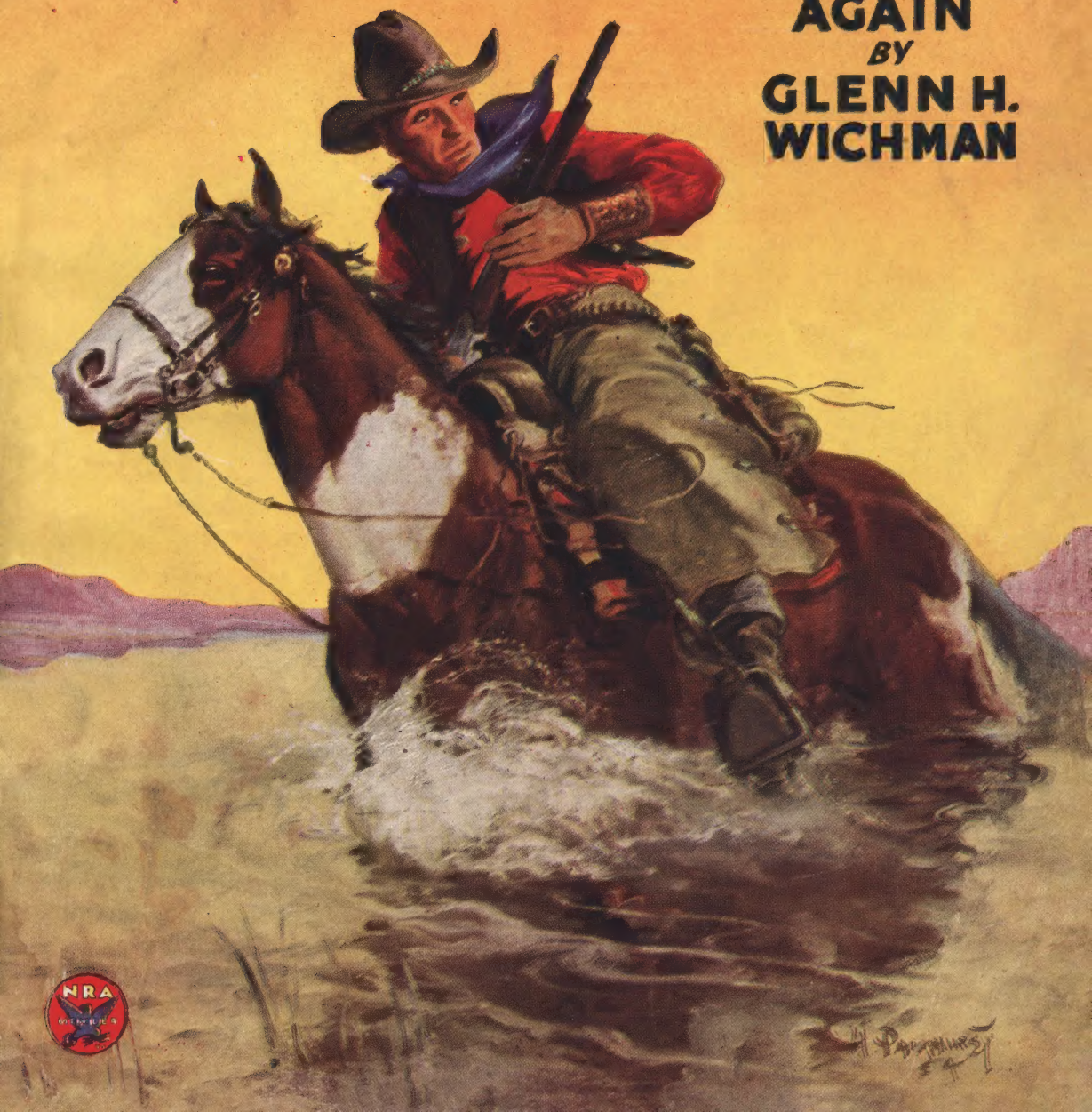
WEARIN' THE STAR AGAIN

BY

GLENN H. WICHMAN



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31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
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29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.15
31x6.00-19	3.42	1.15
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.25
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Size	Tires	Tubes
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32x4½	3.45	1.15
34x4½	3.45	1.15
30x5	3.65	1.35
33x5	3.75	1.45
35x5	3.95	1.55

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36x8	12.45	6.25
40x8	15.95	4.95

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WEARIN' THE

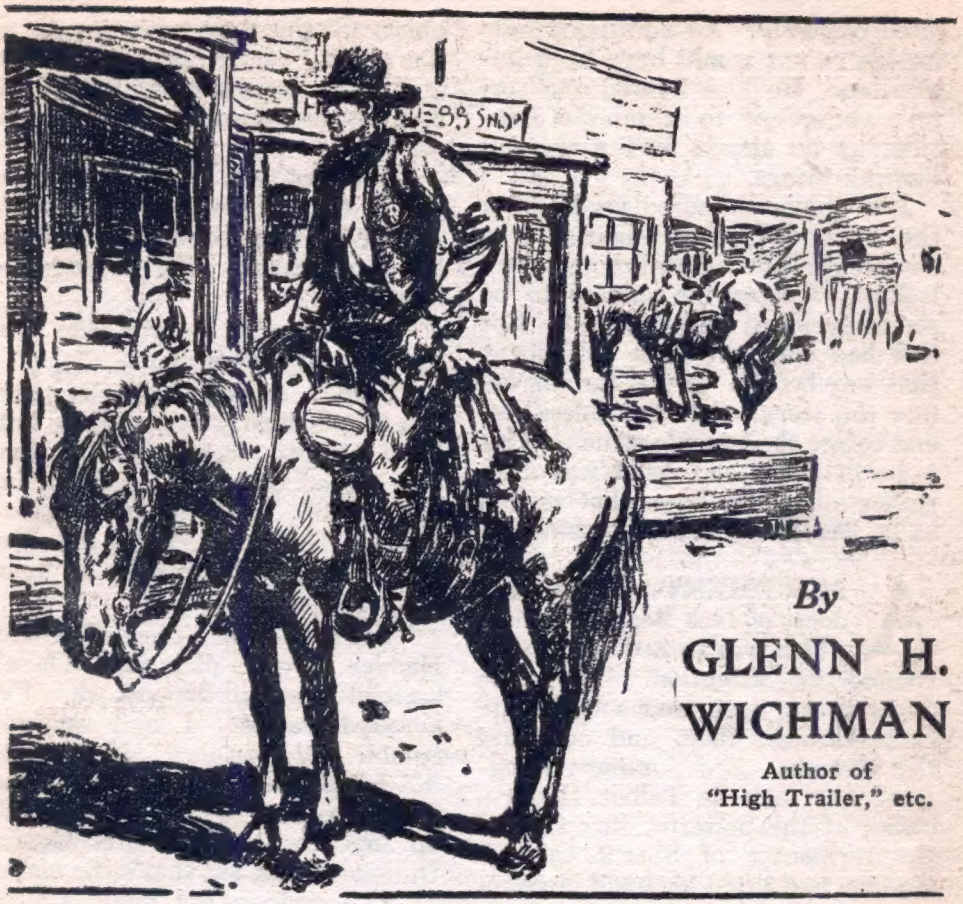
CHAPTER I.

A CALL FOR HELP.

TWO years had passed since Zed Summers had taken the star of Cordova County from his vest and settled down to the relatively peaceful life of a rancher. Two years, and then one spring day a Mexican lad, riding a nearly winded pinto, came stumbling up to the ranch house with a letter from Zed's former employer, Sheriff John Osgood of Cooperville. The tension in Zed's virile body increased as he read those few brief sentences. In them was a plea that was not to be denied.

DEAR ZED: Your old boss is in a jam up here in Cooperville. Got a prisoner, a young fellow, in jail here whom the town folks are all for lynching. So far I've protected him, but there's a limit to my endurance. I can't stay awake forever, and Talbot Hadden is after him! You know what that means!

I haven't been able to rustle up any deputies to help me that I can trust. I hate to call you off your ranch and up into another county, but there seems no other



By

GLENN H. WICHMAN

Author of "High Trailer," etc.

STAR AGAIN

way. Would you mind climbing onto that long-legged sorrel of yourn and coming to my assistance? I have in mind the many times that we've rode together. I hope you ain't forgot 'em. Fork the nag, Zed, and save your old boss's reputation for never having had a prisoner taken away from him. Suit yourself, son, but somehow I can't imagine you deserting me.

If you choose to come, ride like the devil. There won't be a minute to spare.

Your old friend,

JOHN OSGOOD.

So it was that Sheriff John Osgood's former deputy buckled on his guns, said good-by to his spread, saddled his horse, and streaked away to the northward. He had never ridden quite so hard in all his life. Time passed, and he was within sight of his destination. Cooperville lay there before him.

Zed Summers rode slowly down the dusty main street of the little cow town. The horse beneath him was nearly exhausted, half stumbling as it went along. Two hundred miles of as hard traveling as an animal had ever been called upon to do lay behind. A judge of both man and horseflesh, Zed had calcu-

lated correctly. An additional mile for his mount would have been impossible. He had figured the sorrel's endurance to a minute fraction, as he always had a way of figuring things.

Less than a hundred yards down the street lay his destination, the combination sheriff's office and town lockup. Cooperville seemed to be strangely silent and deserted. But Zed had seen the little settlement that way before. It was the lull before the storm, that breathless second before the tornado struck. This sense of peace and quiet was altogether false. He knew that as well as he had ever known anything.

A MOVEMENT of the wing doors of Jack Beagle's saloon, which was to Zed's right, attracted his attention. Then the doors swung open, and a tall figure came through them and out onto the veranda. Zed Summers recognized the man as Talbot Hadden, owner of the powerful Box C, and the tormentor of Sheriff Osgood. Hadden half lifted his hand in greeting, and then moved swiftly off the veranda and out into the dusty street. A second and he was standing there in front of Zed's sorrel. The animal willingly came to a complete stop.

"Howdy!" said Hadden, but there was no friendliness in the solitary word.

Zed Summers looked over his horse's head and down at the man there before him. Some time had passed since he had last seen the rancher. Except for more gray hairs around the temples, the years had brought no change. A proud, irascible man was the owner of the Box C, quick of tongue and temper, and even quicker of trigger. A devil on wheels when he got started. And, unless all the signs were wrong, he was about to start now. A hundred and ninety pounds of sputtering human dynamite stood there in the roadway.

"How are you, Hadden?" replied Zed, with an equal lack of warmth.

Hadden was looking up at him, his eyes blazing with ill-concealed fury.

"I see you're wearin' the star again," said the cowman.

"Yeah," replied Zed Summers. His fingers lightly caressed the battered deputy sheriff's badge that was pinned upon his loosely fitting vest. "It's the star of Cordova County, Hadden. An old friend of mine. I'm right proud to be wearin' it again."

"You're a fool!" growled Talbot Hadden. "Just a plain fool! There's been odd times in the past when I've admired you, Zed. I don't want any trouble with you now. If it comes, it'll be of your own choosin'. But if you force me to it—— I've made up my mind to see that George Durkee's hung, an' that's the end of it! I've made up my mind! Understand?"

"Lots of men have made up their minds," quietly said the deputy. "It's an old habit of mankind. And ofttimes they've changed them, too. Don't be so foolish as to overlook the main chance, Hadden. Sheriff Osgood has said that the prisoner, George Durkee, is *not* goin' to be hanged until he's had a legal and lawful trial before the circuit judge. That goes for me, too. In fact, that's why I'm here."

The deputy could see that the rancher's mouth had set, and that his eyes were blazing like a she-wolf's at bay. Talbot Hadden was a dangerous man to cross, more so at this instant, perhaps, than ever

before. Zed no longer held the reins of his horse; his hands, both of them, were very near the well-worn butts of twin Colts. If Hadden should be so foolish as to make a move, Zed Summers could do nothing but defend himself.

Suddenly the cowman relaxed and half smiled, a crooked smile that twisted his thin lips.

"Mebbe you ain't got the straight of it, Zed," he finally mumbled. "I'll tell it to you. This skunk, George Durkee, is guilty of as foul a murder as a man ever committed. He's no more entitled to the right to live as is a rattler. It's a waste of time an' money to have a trial.

"That's what the town thinks, an' that's what the whole county thinks. We would have hung him days ago if it hadn't been for Osgood. Somebody shot the sheriff in the arm, but still he wouldn't surrender his prisoner. There he sits now in his shack, a rifle on his knees, a six-gun in either holster, and a crazy idea in his head.

"Any time durin' the past three days we could have got the prisoner, but it would have meant killin' the sheriff. Osgood means well, but he's a fool. A few more hours and he would have collapsed of exhaustion. Then we could have got the prisoner an' hung him. But now you've come, Zed! You've made the bad mistake of comin' back to Cooperville! You're not like the sheriff! You're young an' well an' hardy, an' can defend yourself. You'll get no sympathy from me or from my men, and no sympathy from the murdered man's brother, or from his friends.

"I'm givin' you fair warnin', Zed Summers! Turn your nag around an' travel some place else! Cooperville ain't no town at all for you to come to."

ZED SUMMERS could feel a growing sense of irritation that nearly overwhelmed him. Although he never took his eyes from Talbot Hadden's face, he was conscious that men had come from Jack Beagle's saloon and were standing in groups on the veranda. And there were also men in front of the general store and the harness shop next door to it. The town had come to life.

Zed spoke slowly and earnestly, and very quietly, when he finally got around to it. "Hadden," he said, "you can roll this up in a wheat-straw an' smoke it at your leisure: Once more I'm a deputy sheriff of Cordova County, an' no man lives who can tell me where I can go, or how or when! I know little of this man Durkee, or the charges against him, whether they be true or false. But I'm tellin' you this: There'll be no rope end knotted around his neck without due process of law as set forth in the statutes of this State!"

Hadden's lips were trembling with anger. There was silence, a long, full minute of it.

"We'll ride you down, Zed," grumbled the rancher, "like as if you were a sheep-herder! I've given you fair warnin'! It'll be no shot in the back! You'll stand an' take it!"

"I've stood before," replied Zed Summers. "I've stood an' took it! I reckon I can do it again. One time or another, Hadden—it's all the same to me."

As weary and irritated as he was, he knew that this was not the time to provoke a show-down, as much as he would momentarily have enjoyed it. Hot words were on his lips, but he checked them. First of all, he was again an officer of the law. And in the second place, he had always had a sneaking sense of

admiration for this same Talbot Hadden. There were things about the man—— Zed dusted the cobwebs from his tired brain.

"Hadden," he said, loudly enough for the men on the veranda of the saloon to hear, "you're blockin' my way! I'm headin' down the street! Man—I'm ridin', an' you're in my way! Don't you see? You're in my way!"

Hadden's face went purple at the words, and his right hand moved nearer to the six-gun on his hip. He tried to speak, but the words choked in his throat.

Zed shoved the sorrel in the flanks. A wisp of a smile crossed his lips. Suddenly the owner of the Box C stepped aside. The horse would have trampled him if he hadn't. Hadden had seen fit to pass up the show-down.

"I'll see you later," mumbled the deputy as he moved on.

"You're darn well right you will!" growled the rancher.

Zed knew Talbot Hadden well enough to know that no shot would come toward him from behind. He continued at a slow walk down the street.

Cooperville hadn't changed a particle during the years of his absence. Like a volcano, it seemed always ready to explode at some odd and unexpected moment. Strange and awful sights that dusty street had witnessed during the years gone by. Items of interest in great numbers could be pointed out to the curious by any old-timer who might choose to talk.

Zed came to the hitch rail in front of the sheriff's little shack. The door stood open. He glanced inside without dismounting. There sat the sheriff, just as Hadden had described him. Osgood had a rifle across his knees. His left arm hung limply; blood had dyed the cloth of his shirt sleeve the color of brick dust.

"Just a minute an' I'll be back!" Zed called as the sheriff raised his right hand in recognition.

ZED took the sorrel around to the rear of the combination jail and office, where there was a feed barn and a small corral. He yanked off the saddle, saw that there was water, oats, and hay. As the great horse ate, the deputy worked swiftly with his hands. A quarter of an hour and he was convinced that the sorrel had not been ruined beyond repair. A day or two of rest and proper care and the horse would be itself again.

Zed retraced his steps, entered the building, and stood before the sheriff.

"I knew you'd come," said Osgood, "but I doubted that it would be soon enough. At times I've almost hoped you wouldn't come at all. It appears like, Zed—— Well, I think this time we're up against it!"

Zed stood for a moment looking down at the old man. That the sheriff had nearly reached the end of his string was obvious. His eyes were deeply sunken in his head, the flush of fever was on his forehead. Only the grim, hard line of his mouth seemed normal; all the rest of him seemed old and shrunken.

"It's really you, is it?" asked Osgood. "I'm not dreamin'? I've had some powerful queer ideas in my noggin while I've been sittin' here. Days on end——"

Suddenly the sheriff seemed to wilt. The deputy stepped closer and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"It's no dream this time, John," he said. "You're goin' to bed an'

forget about it. I'm as fresh as a daisy!"

"Good boy," whispered Osgood. "Good old Zed!"

"Tell me what's gone on," Zed said, "in as few words as you've ever used in your life. Just a rough outline, John."

"There's little enough I know," whispered the sheriff. "That's the devil of it! They brought the prisoner, George Durkee, in to me. Then Talbot Hadden came ridin' in from the Box C with all his men an' wanted to string the young fella up.

" 'Hadden,' I said to him, 'there's no need of that, because the circuit judge will be here in three weeks, an' we can do it regular.'

"But Talbot was as mad as a hornet, an' all set for the necktie party.

" 'Listen, Hadden,' I said, 'nobody yet's ever taken a prisoner away from me, an' I'll be darned if you're the one that's goin' to start it. Get outta here before I throw you out!'

"Then some jasper up an' took a shot at me an' got me in the arm. I returned the compliment, an' they broke an' ran like a pack of wolves. That is, they all ran but Hadden.

" 'Osgood,' Hadden said, 'I'd take great pleasure in finishin' you off, but I can't draw on a guy that's already got one hole in him. Nevertheless, I'm goin' to get this Durkee an' hang him! I'll wait either until you die of old age, or get well, so you can fight like a man. One way or another, I'm goin' to get that skunk an' hang him!'

"That's the way things have stood, Zed. Hadden has been waitin' for me to fall over, but I haven't fell. I sent for you. There was nobody here that I could trust to deputize. As usual, Hadden's got everybody pretty much buffaloed."

"The crime?" Zed asked.

"Murder. Frank Cornwall was murdered."

"Don't know him. Never heard of him."

"Sure you haven't. Frank an' Jim Cornwall only came to Cooperville about a year ago. Jim has the general store. Frank set himself up as a broker. Mines, land, cattle, anything. He was always havin' a big deal of some kind on hand."

"This George Durkee," continued Zed. "Who's he?"

"Young fella. Hard-rock miner from the Cordova Hills. A clean-lookin' an' clean-actin' kid. I've nothin' to go on but a hunch, but I'd want mighty substantial evidence before I'd sign his death warrant."

"What's caused Talbot Hadden to get in such a sweat?" asked Zed Summers. "What was this Frank Cornwall to him?"

"A friend, mebbe," said Osgood, "as near as I can make out. It's on account of his daughter, Muriel, that Hadden's so worked up. There's a love affair between Muriel Hadden an' young Durkee. That's poison to Talbot. Muriel, you remember, was supposed to marry Pretty Boy Bailey of the Circle W. She doesn't seem to like Pretty Boy much better than I do.

"Jim Cornwall, the brother of the murdered man, made the arrest and brought in the prisoner. Jim Cornwall, together with a fella named Grat Lofthouse.

"This Grat Lofthouse has the looks of a gunman, but he claims to have reformed. Mebbe he has; I've got nothin' again' him. He worked for the murdered man. By the way, Grat and Jim Cornwall got themselves worked up to the point where they would have finished me off if it hadn't been for Hadden. Hadden takes a lot of pride in what he calls

his honor. He'd take a lot of pleasure in shootin' me, but it's got to be done accordin' to the rules he's laid down for himself. And one of them is that he won't plug a fella who's already half out. Shucks, Zed—things are all mixed up!"

"The evidence?" asked Zed.

The sheriff pointed toward an envelope on the top of the desk that stood in one corner.

"There's a couple of twenty-dollar bills in that envelope. There's blood on them, an' bullet holes through them. They belonged to Frank Cornwall; he was carryin' them when he was killed. Afterward they were found on George Durkee."

"Who found them?"

"Jim Cornwall and Grat Lofthouse." Osgood took keys from his pocket and held them out. "These fit the cell door, Zed, an' the front an' back doors. In the old days, son, you were a good hand at a cold case. This one's entirely frozen. I haven't been able to move an inch out of here to gather any kind of information whatever. All I've done is guard the prisoner while the clews congealed. How you're goin' to manage it, I don't know. For the next twenty-four hours or so I'm leavin' that entirely to you. Anything goes. Mebbe the prisoner's guilty, and then mebbe he isn't. Do your best!"

"I will," said Zed.

The deputy examined the sheriff's wound. It was not bad, just a puncture in the fleshy part of the forearm. Lack of sleep and days of worry, together with constant vigilance, was what had worn Osgood down. Sleep was what he needed most.

"I almost forgot to mention it, but the prisoner's armed," continued Osgood. "He's got a couple of the best .45s that Mr. Colt ever made, and three hundred rounds of ammunition. I gave 'em to him. He's expectin' you, but be careful how you introduce yourself." The sheriff struggled to his feet. "Be seein' you, son!"

Zed Summers stood in the doorway and watched John Osgood walk unsteadily down the street toward the clump of cottonwoods in which his bachelor cottage stood. Three minutes and he was out of sight.

Thoughtfully Zed stroked his chin. So the prisoner was armed! Had two guns and three hundred rounds of ammunition! In other words—Sheriff Osgood had trusted him!

It was very puzzling!

CHAPTER II.

THE PRISONER.

THE Cooperville lockup was in the same building as the sheriff's office, and immediately behind it. There were two cells, built of strap iron and heavy oak planking, with a narrow passageway between them.

Summers crossed the office and stood in the door that led into the passageway.

"Hello, there, prisoner!" he called out. "I'm Zed Summers, a deputy sheriff, an' I'm comin' back to where you are! Lay aside the hardware!"

"All right!" was the answer. "Come ahead! Osgood's told me about you!"

Zed strode down the passageway and looked through the iron bars of the cell door. He saw a young man, somewhat younger than himself; a well-built, compact, pleasant-faced young fellow. Worry and fear had left marks on his forehead, and there were fine lines around his bloodshot eyes.

On the bunk lay the two guns

that the sheriff had mentioned. The hammer of each was cocked. The ammunition was neatly arranged in rows of six each to simplify quick loading.

Zed Summers unlocked the door and went inside. He motioned for the prisoner to sit down at one end of the bunk; he himself sat down at the other.

"Durkee," began Zed, "I want the truth, the whole truth, an' nothin' but the truth. I've no time for needless details. Time's passin', an' there's little enough of it. Your life hangs by the narrowest kind of a thread."

"I know," said Durkee. "I'm still wonderin' how it is that I'm alive."

"Never mind that!" snapped the deputy. "You've killed a man! Was there just cause? What was the reason?"

"I've killed no one!" said the miner. "That's a lie!"

Suddenly he launched forth upon his narrative:

"It's two years since I moved down from Colorado. I came to the Cordova Hills. They've been worked for years. There's a ledge there somewhere, a regular mother lode. The old placer diggin's down in Chinese Wash proves that. I started prospectin' for that ledge, but I couldn't find it.

"They're any number of half-developed prospects up there in the hills. I got interested in one of them. It was known as the Lucky Nellie Mine. There was a tunnel an' a couple of drifts. At the end of one of the drifts there was a vein of white quartz that showed free gold in microscopic quantities. The property belonged to a Frank Cornwall of Cooperville. I couldn't quite figure why the property was layin' idle with such good showin's there on the face of the drift. Anyway, I came in here to Cooperville and talked with this Frank Cornwall. He's the fella I'm supposed to have killed.

"Cornwall wanted me to lease the Lucky Nellie on a percentage basis. I had a thousand in cash. The prospect looked so good that I paid the thousand down an' took the lease."

Durkee paused and passed a hand over his hot forehead.

"Go on," urged Zed. "You took the lease——"

"Yeah," sighed the young miner. "I was a sucker! That free gold fooled me. All the value there was was right there on the face of the workin's. Frank Cornwall had salted it. Had taken a shotgun and peppered the white quartz with fine gold. It's an old trick. One of the oldest and scabbiest in the minin' business. I fell for it.

"But I didn't say anything. I was sort of ashamed of myself. I continued to push the drift. Occasionally I would pick up a pocket. That kept me goin'—kept my stomach full of beans an' my spirits up."

"You had strong words, I suppose, at odd times with this Frank Cornwall?" asked Zed.

"Never!" replied Durkee. "I never gave Cornwall the chance to laugh at me. I was afraid he would. At first there was murder in my heart, but that passed."

"Come down to the day of the killin'," said Zed. "What was it that happened, an' how?"

"It was toward evening when Jim Cornwall, brother of Frank Cornwall, and a man named Grat Lofthouse came up to my cabin. Grat came up first, a gun in either hand, as I stood there in the doorway.

" 'Durkee,' he said to me, 'the sheriff wants to see you down in Cooperville. We've orders to bring

you in dead or alive. It don't matter a bit to us which it is!'

"'You've killed my brother Frank!' spoke up Jim Cornwall."

DURKEE squirmed restlessly on the bunk. For many seconds he looked earnestly into Zed's eyes. Zed returned the stare unflinchingly, trying to figure out what was behind that level gaze.

"I was plain scared," admitted the miner. "Not because I was accused of killin' Frank Cornwall, but because there was—there was, Summers, a dead man there on my property! And it wasn't Frank Cornwall, either!"

"Thunderation!" growled Zed. "Then they're two dead men instead of one?"

Durkee wiped beads of perspiration from his forehead.

"Sometimes," he said, "I think I'm the world's biggest jackass! The Lucky Nellie Mine is on the east side of Fish Ridge. On the west side of Fish Ridge is another prospect called the Little Dollar, which was owned an' operated by Old Man Drafus.

"Just before dusk on the evening before Grat Lofthouse an' Jim Cornwall came to my cabin, I had heard two gunshots in quick succession. They were close at hand, but that wasn't anything unusual. I hardly gave it a thought. Mebbe some one was out for rabbits.

"Next morning I went out to cut some brush for firewood. There in the brush on my property lay Old Man Drafus. He was dead; had been shot twice! Both slugs had come from the rear, one hitting him in the head, and the other between the shoulder blades.

"There was a good reason why I got sort of panicky. Drafus and I were driftin' toward each other through the ridge. The old man worried a lot because he thought that I was gettin' over on his property. We had had words; had had them before witnesses. And now Drafus was dead, shot in the back not more than two hundred yards from my cabin.

"I spent the bulk of the day scoutin' around tryin' to figure out what had happened. Of course, I expected to be blamed for it. One minute I was all for ridin' into Cooperville an' tellin' the sheriff, an' the next I wasn't. I had no alibi. All I could see ahead of me was the noose.

"Then it was that Lofthouse and Jim Cornwall showed up and accused me of murdering Frank Cornwall. I came on into Cooperville with them. The sheriff locked me up here. A couple of hours an' Talbot Hadden an' the Box C riders came into town with the idea of lynchin' me. Osgood put a stop to that, an' he's been guardin' me ever since; that is, until you came."

Zed began his questioning:

"Where was Frank Cornwall's body found?"

"Jim said they found it not far from my cabin in the brush. I didn't see it. We rode in here to Cooperville. Grat Lofthouse gave Osgood two twenty-dollar bills that were blood-smeared and had bullet holes in them. Grat said they had found them in my pocket, an' that they belonged to Frank. They did search me. How the money came to be there, I don't know. I didn't put it there. I'll swear to that!"

"You had reason enough to be angry at Frank Cornwall," Zed reminded him. "People naturally figure——"

"Nobody knows that Cornwall cheated me except you and Sheriff Osgood," interrupted the prisoner. "I've never breathed a word of it

to any one except you two. Frank's been out to the mine many times. He's watched me like a hawk. I never gave him the satisfaction of letting him know that I had been swindled. The conditions in the lease provided that he could inspect the workin's at any time. He came an' went as he chose. Here's my key to the mine. I'm givin' it to you. Cornwall had the other one."

"They've buried Old Man Drafus?" asked Zed.

"I don't think his body's ever been discovered. Osgood thought it was better not to say anything about it until you came.

"Here's another thing," continued Durkee after a moment's pause, "that'll make it look even worse for me when the news leaks out. One week ago to-day I made the discovery of my life! Summers—I found the mother lode that I'd been lookin' for! The original lode that in bygone centuries furnished the pay dirt for the Chinese Wash placer. I'm sure I've found it! Right there in the face of my drift! If it doesn't run ten thousand dollars to the ton, I'm no judge of rock!"

The deputy whistled. "An' Frank Cornwall had a legal interest in this strike you've made! It would have profited you enormously, Durkee, to have killed him!"

"I know it would have," admitted the young miner with complete frankness. "But I'm not altogether a fool. I was happy, Summers. I was happy! I was going to be absolutely honest with Cornwall. There was money enough there for both of us. Barrels of it."

"Did Cornwall know that you had found the lode?"

"Perhaps. I don't know for sure. I was goin' to say nothin' to him until I was doubly sure that I was right. He often made his inspections of the mine after dark. A blind man could have seen the values there on the working face. He could have come an' gone after nightfall without me havin' seen him. We were naturally never what you might call companionable. There was no reason why he should have stopped at my cabin an' talked to me."

"Singular—ain't it?" mumbled Zed. "The two men in the world who would have profited most by your discovery are now dead. Drafus, who owned the Little Dollar, could no doubt have picked up the vein from the other side of the ridge. He's dead! Frank Cornwall would have gotten a percentage of all the gold you took out. He's dead! Durkee, there was every motive in the world for you to kill either or both of them. Why, man alive—don't you see what a case the State's got!"

"Except," objected Durkee, "that I never laid a hand or drew a gun on either one of them. Why should I? There I was, sittin' with a fortune almost in my lap. An ample fortune. More than I would ever need. What reason would there have been in my tryin' to increase it at the risk of having my neck stretched?"

"A reason can be figured out for almost anything," answered the deputy. "Perhaps you feared Drafus an' Cornwall an' thought it best to be rid of them forever."

Durkee drew himself up to his full height, which was considerable under Zed's six feet.

"You're wrong, Summers! I was not afraid of them. And I wanted to live. If ever a man wanted to live, I did! Not for the gold alone. There's another reason."

For the first time a flush had come to the prisoner's cheeks, and his eyes

were dancing with a mingling of hope and anticipation.

"Muriel Hadden!" whispered Zed. "Osgood told me about you an' her. And Talbot Hadden was never so hot for anything in his life as he is to have you hung. He has a reason somewhere—a real reason!"

"Hadden considers me to be somewhat lower than a snake's belly," explained the prisoner. "He hates me—but that's a parent's privilege. I love his daughter. She loves me. We have agreed between us to be married.

"Perhaps you know the owner of the Circle W Ranch? They call him Pretty Boy Bailey. Muriel's father is determined that she shall marry him, regardless of her own wishes. She refuses. Hadden has dreams of empire. Not for himself, but for his daughter and his son-in-law. There'll be the Box C an' the Circle W joined together by wedlock. Hadden likes Pretty Boy Bailey. I despise him. Muriel is anything but fond of him. But I have not tried to turn her against him. The feeling seems to be natural with her.

"Muriel's father's idea of nobody at all is a miner. He looks down upon me as he would a gopher or a prairie dog—something low that burrows in the ground like a rabbit. I think he's perfectly honest in that belief."

"I can understand," interrupted the deputy, "a cowman not wantin' his daughter to marry a miner, but most fathers aren't as bloodthirsty about it as is old Hadden. You're sure, Durkee, that Hadden knows nothing of the gold you've found?"

George Durkee's face went pale.

"Perhaps he does. He was friendly with Frank Cornwall. They were together out on the Box C many times. If Cornwall knew, there's a chance that Hadden knows. Understand, I have no desire to involve Muriel's father in this mess."

"You have yourself to think of, Durkee," said Zed. The deputy took to walking up and down the short length of the cell, taking deep drags at his wheat-straw cigarette. "Muriel Hadden's been here to see you since you've been in jail?"

"She has. Twice! Hadden's tried to stop her, but she has a will of her own. She believes me innocent."

"If she loves you, she'd be no kind of a woman at all if she didn't. Listen, Durkee! You've told me everything?"

"Everything!"

"How about Pretty Boy Bailey?" continued the deputy. "He ought to cut in on this somewhere."

"Just an interested onlooker," answered the miner. "I've heard tales about him, his trips across the border, queerly branded cattle that clutter up his Circle W. But all I know is what I've heard."

FAINT sounds of footsteps came to Zed's keen ears from the direction of the sheriff's office. He stepped quickly out into the passageway, closed and locked the cell door behind him. Hurrying on, he saw that Muriel Hadden had just stepped in from off the board walk. The girl's little pinto was tied to the hitch rack out in front.

Some time had passed since Zed had last seen Talbot Hadden's daughter. He remembered her as a rather gangling, awkward girl of fifteen. But now maturity had come; she was very lovely, and every inch a graceful woman.

"Zed Summers!" she cried, and, coming across the room, put her two hands in his big ones. "You've come! I'm glad—I'm glad!"

Zed's memories of the girl were of the pleasantest. She had been an

understanding, kind, and obliging child—folks said that she resembled her dead mother much more than she did her father. She had grown to be very beautiful, thought Zed, as he stood there looking down at her; very beautiful indeed. Her eyes were as blue as the sky on a spring morning, her hair the color of spun gold, her cheeks as delicately tinted as the petals of a rose.

Zed shifted his gaze. He was looking beyond her, over her shoulder, through the open door and across the street. There, on the veranda of the general store, stood Talbot Hadden! The rancher stood looking in the direction of the sheriff's shack, his legs apart, a hand on either hip. That he was angry at his daughter's actions was, of course, evident.

"You've talked to George?" asked Muriel of the deputy.

"Just finished."

Muriel Hadden reached up and caught Zed by the ears.

"Then give me the verdict—Judge Summers!" she whispered, half playfully, but with an underlying earnestness that was very real.

"You love him?" asked Zed.

"More than life itself!" Tears sparkled in her eyes. "I would die for him—to-day, to-morrow, any time!"

"He's waitin' for you," said Zed. "I'll take you to his cell."

The girl took a step backward. There was fear now on her face.

"You think he did it, Zed?"

"I'll do my best to find out," answered the deputy. "Indeed I will."

She brightened a little.

"You won't turn him over to the mob, will you?"

"A deputy sheriff of Cordova County," he answered, "turns no one over to *any* mob."

Zed went down the passageway, the girl at his heels.

"You've got a caller, George," he said, and swung open the cell door. "I think, Muriel," he added, "that it'd be a pious idea for you to make your visit brief. Your dad, you know, he's waitin' for you out there in the street. He won't wait forever."

Then Zed Summers turned his back upon the young folks and went again into the office. He could not remember a time when his heart had felt quite so heavy. But with it there was an underlying sense of exhilaration. Action was coming, action swift and certain. A clash of wits and gunfire and hot lead!

Three men had now joined Talbot Hadden on the veranda in front of the general store. Others were coming from Jack Beagle's barroom and were crossing the street toward the owner of the Box C. Zed wanted of all things that Muriel should be away from there before anything got started. In his anger, there was no telling how far Talbot Hadden might go. Zed marveled that the rancher had stayed his hand thus far. To see his daughter come there to the jail—— Five more men had joined Hadden.

The deputy spun on his heel and called out:

"Muriel—say your good-bys in a hurry! It's time to go! Quick—there may not be a minute!"

The girl came running out through the passageway, followed by the prisoner. She was armed, carried a .32 in a rather low-hung holster.

"I'm not afraid," she said. "I'll make my stand with the two of you."

"Your horse is at the hitch rail," said the deputy. "Mount it and

ride. Durkee, get back in your cell. If I want you, I'll let you know."

They both obeyed his orders without question. Muriel went outside, untied the pinto, and calmly climbed into the saddle. Zed stood framed in the doorway of the sheriff's shack. There were many men now on the board walk opposite, a crowd of them. Silent men. Grim men. Zed had never known the town to be so quiet.

All eyes were on the girl. Without looking to the right or left, she rode slowly down the street toward the west. The only sound was the clatter of her pony's hoofs. She was gone now. Dusk had come. Shadows were almost horizontal, stretched out long to the eastward.

Zed was again watching Hadden. The rancher had detached himself from the group of men. It appeared that he was about to start across the street toward the jail. Zed swore softly to himself. He was entirely certain of at least one thing. Within the next three minutes blood would flow in Cooperville!

CHAPTER III.

HADDEN TRIES A DRAW.

ZED SUMMERS moved away from the wall of the jail and out to the edge of the board walk. There was movement among the men opposite. It was as though a truncated cone had been suddenly formed. The onlookers formed the sides of the cone; Zed himself was the base, and the slowly oncoming Talbot Hadden was the flattened apex of that roughly outlined triangle of death.

When Hadden reached the center of the dusty street he stopped in his tracks, stood there with his legs apart, his massive torso thrust slightly forward.

"Summers," he slowly said, "I've come for the prisoner! I'll be denied no longer!"

For a second Zed let his gaze wander over the group of men. Darkness was setting in; he could recognize but few of them. Reason told him that nine out of ten of them were in no personal way concerned with what was about to take place. But their conduct would, nevertheless, be governed by their fear of Talbot Hadden.

"Summers," loudly repeated the rancher, "I've come for the prisoner!"

Zed's mouth opened. "Hadden," he slowly answered, "you've come for something that you have no right to. The prisoner belongs to me and Sheriff Osgood until such time as a court of law takes charge of him."

All was silence now, no scuffling of feet or anything.

The rancher took a step forward.

"There'll be no argument, Summers! The time for talk has passed! I've told you what I've come for!"

"Talbot Hadden," said Zed, "if you take another step—I'll kill you!"

And so they stood there in the twilight, those two determined men with less than twenty feet of still air separating them. There could be no compromise now; that they would draw and fire was as inevitable as the coming of a new day on the morrow.

"I'm waitin' for you, Hadden!" spoke Zed. "Whenever you're ready —reach for it!"

Zed's elbows were slowly drawing up. Hadden did not worry him half so much as did those other men. Once let a shot be fired and there was no telling what might break loose.

"I'll shoot the gun from your hand

before your thumb can touch the hammer!" taunted Zed. "Reach for it, Hadden! Reach for it if you dare!"

With an oath, the rancher's hand shot holsterward!

Zed had never moved more quickly. The rhythmic flip of his fingers was like the movement of a bird's wing, and twice as fast. His Colt roared before Hadden had completed his draw. The rancher's gun was torn from his hand by the deputy's slug, spun crazily in the air, then fell with a thud in the dust at his feet.

Quickly Zed backed up against the wall of the sheriff's shack, both guns drawn.

"Give way, you hounds!" he roared at the crowd. "Give way! Clear the street, you fools—before I shoot!"

One determined, unafraid man stood there against half a hundred. The onlookers broke ranks and ran. There was the stamp of boots on the board walk; a dust cloud quickly formed in the street. But a single man among them stood his ground. Talbot Hadden had not moved an inch!

"You've got me, Zed!" said Hadden when quiet came. "I would have killed you if I could!"

"Pick up your gun," Zed answered, "an' be off! Gather up your men, Hadden, an' ride for home! You've got no more business here in Cooperville to-night!"

BUT the rancher did not pick up his gun. He gave the Colt a savage kick with his boot and strode off toward the hitch rail in front of Beagle's barroom. Darkness had come. Zed stood there for a moment. Suddenly there was a burst of revolver fire from the direction of the rooming house, which was some distance down the street. The half-spent slugs rattled harmlessly against the false front of the sheriff's shack.

"The fools!" growled Zed. He backed through the open door and into the dark office.

"They didn't hit you?" called out Durkee as he came into the room.

"Not a chance! But real trouble ought to get here before daylight. George, I'm goin' to make a deal with you. I can't do anything with you hangin' around my neck. You wouldn't be safe here alone for five minutes. In short, I'm going to turn you loose!"

Zed could hear the prisoner's audible gasp of surprise.

"This procedure may well surprise you," continued the deputy, "but perhaps I know what I'm about. It's something that I've never done before. I'm trustin' you, Durkee, to do exactly as I tell you."

"I'll not run away," interrupted the prisoner. "Not with what I have at stake. There's Muriel! I'll agree to anything you say!"

"There's a road that runs around the face of Bald Butte," explained Zed. "It's not far from Bailey's Circle W. There's a fork in the road near what they call the Antelope Pear Thickets. Ever hear of it?"

"I know the spot," answered Durkee. "There's no better place for a man to lose himself. But I don't want to lose myself! I want to stay here an' help clear myself."

"You'll do as I tell you," Zed said. "You're to go into that pear thicket. Each night you'll work your way down to the fork. Stay there until midnight. If I want you, I'll come to the fork. I'll whistle three times in quick succession. That'll be the signal for you to break cover."

Within much less than an hour,

Durkee was ready for riding. He carried twin holsters that belonged to the sheriff, a slicker, a blanket, and a saddlebag filled with provisions. All the work had been done in the darkness.

A clatter of hoofs in the street attracted Zed's attention. He put his head out the front door and saw many horsemen. They were riding west. It was too dark to be sure of their identity, but he imagined them to be Box C riders returning to the ranch. After they had gone, the town quieted down, seemed more or less deserted.

Zed noiselessly unbolted the rear door of the jail. He stood for a moment listening, and then went out to the corral. There were two horses there that belonged to Osgood. He selected a long-legged roan, put a saddle on it, and adjusted the saddlebag. The prisoner was waiting at the corral gate.

"Mount up," said Zed. "Pick your way out of town as carefully as you can. Travel south until you hit the road. Then east to the pear thicket."

"I know the way," answered Durkee. "And thanks a thousand times. You'll not regret it."

"I know I won't," Zed mumbled. "Remember this: if you skip the country, it'll be a confession of your guilt. An' another thing: I can always find you. There's been but one man who ever got away from me! An' some day I'll find him!"

He stood there by the rear door of the jail as Durkee moved off through the night. A minute and he could no longer hear the horse's hoofs. But there was another sound there by the corral. Zed stiffened, and his hands were on his guns.

The next thing he knew something whizzed by his head and hit with a thump against the side of the building not three inches from his right ear. He dropped to his knees and then to the ground, dropped all in one split second. He lay still. Footsteps were retreating into the darkness. Hurried footsteps.

Gradually he got to his feet, felt his way along the wall with his fingers. Shortly his hand encountered a knife, a long, thin, heavy blade, sticking into the wood. Zed pulled it from its resting place, hefted it in his hand.

"Talbot Hadden," he mused, "never threw a knife in his life, nor would he have hired some one to throw one. There's some other gent here in Cooperville who resents my comin' back to town."

Presently he eased in through the rear door of the jail, closed and locked it behind him. He likewise closed and locked the front door. Then he sought the bunk that the prisoner had vacated, stretched himself upon it. For a long time he lay on his back, staring up into the blackness. When he finally slept, it was with one ear open, his nerves attuned to catch the slightest sound.

CHAPTER IV.

A KILLER STRIKES.

EARLY next morning, Zed Summers had his breakfast in the Nugget Restaurant. There were others eating there; almost without exception they eyed him with hostility. He recalled having seen but few of them before. He ate his meal in silence.

Next door to the eating house was a store. The sign across the false front read:

JIM CORNWALL
General Merchandise

Zed opened the screen door of the mercantile establishment and stepped inside. Two young men were piling canned goods on a shelf.

"Cornwall around?" asked the deputy.

One of the clerks pointed toward the rear of the room.

There was a desk in one corner. A man stood up behind it. Zed sized Jim Cornwall up at a glance as a typical cow-town merchant of middle age.

"Mornin', deputy!" said the brother of the murdered man as he stepped from behind his desk. He held out his hand. Zed shook it perfunctorily.

"I hope," continued Cornwall, "that you don't think that I personally had anything to do with shootin' the sheriff in the arm or tryin' to lynch the prisoner. I believe in lettin' the law take its course."

"I'm sure you do," answered Zed.

A clatter of hoofs interrupted. The street was suddenly full of riders. They were coming in from the east, and at their head rode "Pretty Boy" Bailey of the Circle W.

"Damn!" thought Zed as he hastened to the front door. "Now what's the matter? I no sooner get rid of one bunch of coyotes than in comes another!"

The cavalcade had drawn up in front of the jail. Bailey had a gun in his hand, was calling out for the door to be opened before he broke it down.

Zed hurried across the street toward the lockup.

"Put that gun up, Pretty Boy," he roared, "before you shoot yourself with it!"

The rancher turned in his saddle. Bailey had acquired his rather effeminate nickname owing to the color of his cheeks. He had the complexion of a woman and the disposition of a rattlesnake. He was reputed to have more manners than any man in the county when he could profit by the use of them, and none at all when he couldn't.

"Summers," he said, "I crave to lay hands on this miner! Be so good as to open the door before I take it off its hinges!"

"Sure, I'll open the door," replied Zed good-naturedly. "As a tax payer, I suppose you've got a right to inspect the calaboose."

"What!" exclaimed Pretty Boy. "You'll give him up!"

"If you can find him—he's yours!"

Bailey slid down from off his horse.

"Don't you try to bluff me, Summers!"

Zed unlocked the door. Bailey and a half dozen of his riders stamped into the office. They went back into the passageway, found the cell doors open and the cells empty. Bailey was livid with anger.

"Turned him loose, did yuh!" growled the cowman.

"Not exactly," answered Zed. "He's out on bail."

"Bail, my eye! You'll pay for this, Zed! You'll pay! You wait an' see!"

The last Zed Summers saw of Pretty Boy, he and his men were disappearing through the bat-wing doors of Beagle's barroom.

The news of George Durkee's absence had traveled far by the time Zed got back to the storekeeper.

"Sorry to hear he's gone," said Jim Cornwall. "I don't want to butt in on your business, Summers, but you've let a guilty man slip through your fingers."

"Not slipped," corrected Zed. "I've just got him cached away, safely an' well out of town. In the meantime, I'm buildin' up my case

against him. I suppose you won't mind answerin' a few questions?"

"Go ahead!" said Cornwall. "Naturally, I'll help all I can."

Zed sat down on an empty cracker box beside the desk.

"Where was it you found your brother's body, Cornwall?"

"About a hundred yards from Durkee's cabin up at the mine. Frank had gone up there the mornin' of the day before. He didn't come back that night, an' I got worried. Early in the mornin', Grat Lofthouse an' I started out to look for him. We found him there in the bushes. He'd been murdered."

"Shot?"

"The body'd been so mutilated we could hardly tell. He'd been cut up somethin' terrible. With an ax or something. He was layin' on Durkee's property, an' Grat an' I figured that the miner must have done it. We went up to Durkee's cabin. We surprised him, an' he made no resistance. In his pockets we found money that I could identify as havin' belonged to Frank. There was blood on it an' holes through it. I gave the money to Sheriff Osgood."

"What next?" prompted the deputy.

"We brought Durkee in to the sheriff. On the way we stopped to tell Talbot Hadden about it. He wasn't home, but we left word, and then——"

"Why tell Hadden?" interrupted Zed.

"Well, Talbot had been havin' trouble with his daughter, Muriel, who had wanted to marry Durkee. We thought he'd be interested. It'd sort of spike the young filly's guns, as it were."

"I don't like the way you use the word 'filly,'" objected Zed.

"'Girl,' then! Girl, if it suits you better! But my choice of words comes pretty near bein' my own business, don't it?" Cornwall had bristled noticeably.

"This fella has a temper," thought Zed. Aloud, he continued: "All this time the body was layin' there in the bushes?"

"Yes. But just as soon as Grat an' I had turned the prisoner over to the sheriff, we had the harness maker knock together a pine coffin. Then we got a buckboard and took the box out an' gathered up the remains. Summers, it was the most terrible sight I ever saw."

"Uh-huh," grunted Zed. "I can imagine it. You had a funeral, I suppose?"

"Yes. Early next mornin'. The body was in such shape that it wouldn't keep. It was awful!"

"There was no inquest, then?"

"The sheriff never had a chance to do things right," explained Cornwall. "By the time we got back with the body, Talbot Hadden had come to town all set for a lynchin'. Osgood got shot in the arm defendin' the prisoner. Then Hadden wouldn't let the boys attack the jail because the sheriff had been wounded and couldn't defend himself."

Zed built himself a cigarette, lighted it, got to his feet, and started walking to and fro before the desk.

"Cornwall, what was it you told Hadden that got him so riled up? If Durkee was in jail, it's a cinch that there was no immediate danger of Muriel marryin' him. It doesn't seem reasonable that Talbot would get so excited over your brother's murder. Especially when he had no proof, personally, that a murder had been committed."

"I just left word there as to what had happened," answered the storekeeper. "And remember that my

brother Frank and Talbot were good friends. They'd been together many times."

Zed changed the subject. "From the condition of the body, what would you say had been used to do the killing?"

"I'm only guessin'," admitted Cornwall, "but I would say that he was shot from ambush first an' then attacked with a hammer or a single jack. Please don't talk about it any more, Summers. It makes me sick!"

"Why do you figure that Durkee killed him? There must have been an underlying reason, a motive of some sort."

Cornwall considered the matter a long minute before he answered. "I've thought that over a lot myself," he finally said. "My brother was a business man. He dealt in minin' prospects, land, and cattle. He leased the Lucky Nellie to Durkee and was well paid for it. Perhaps Frank overestimated the value of the mine to the young fellow. Those things sometimes happen in the course of business.

"Of course, to be honest about it, no one knows about a mine. It's a gamble, pure and simple. Durkee never has taken very much gold out of the Lucky Nellie. The way I figure it is that the miner got discouraged, blamed Frank for his failure, and killed him in a fit of anger."

"Mebbe it was insanity," offered Zed. "Only an insane man would have stayed around that claim as long as Durkee must have stayed after the killing."

Zed noticed an almost imperceptible change of color in the storekeeper's face, and a quick, restless movement of his eyes.

"We can tell more about the value of the mine," continued Jim, "when my other brother, Gus Cornwall, gets here. He's a hard-rock miner. I've sent word up to Gus in Montana. But he's a slow traveler; it may be a month before he gets here. Frank an' Gus were twins. The only noticeable difference between them is that Gus has a bad leg. One of them is shorter than the other. He limps somewhat when he walks. But that don't matter; he knows his rock——"

"There's this Grat Lofthouse," interrupted Zed. "Where'll I find him?"

"I think he's over in Beagle's barroom. More'n likely playin' poker. Grat's a gent that it pays to handle with kid gloves. Notches on his gun, an' all that. He used to be a bad one. Frank an' I employed him as a guard because we've always kept considerable money around. A fellow has to take some precautions, you know."

"Sure," agreed Zed as he moved away. "I'll see you later, Cornwall. Thanks for everything!"

The deputy traversed the length of the store and went out onto the board walk. For a moment he stood looking across the street at the saloon. Then he thought of the sheriff. By now Osgood should be awake. Zed changed his mind about looking up Lofthouse and walked down the street toward the clump of cottonwoods.

He found the front door of the sheriff's house ajar, knocked on it, but there was no answer. After waiting a moment, he pushed the door fully open and stepped into the sitting room.

"Hello!" he called.

There was no answer.

To the rear were two bedrooms and the kitchen. Zed was well acquainted with the interior arrangements of the house; he'd been there many times in the past. He started

down the hall, entered a bedroom. Horror froze the blood in his veins. There on the bed lay the sheriff, the hilt of a knife protruding from his throat! The lawman had died instantly.

On the pillow by the sheriff's head was a piece of paper with crude printing on it:

SUMMERS: If you value your life get out of Cooperville and stay out. If you had not come, Osgood might be alive. I have had two chances to kill you and passed them. I will not pass the next one. Get out! You may be hard to kill, but it can be done! XXXXXXX!!!

Zed carefully folded the note and put it in his shirt pocket. Then he covered the body with a sheet. A red mist formed before his eyes, and a mighty resolve formed in his heart.

There was a whole lot more involved now than just the murder of Frank Cornwall. Another man had died. And that man was his own good friend. Zed realized that he was on a trail from which there could never be any turning. It would run on and on and on, until he had at last found the hand that had thrust that knife into the throat of his employer. And when he had found that man——

Zed spent a busy hour at the scene of the murder, looking for a clew.

CHAPTER V.

THE TWO-MAN POSSE.

ZED quit the sheriff's cottage and walked again up the main street of Cooperville. He stopped at Pete Larson's harness shop. Larson's side line was that of town undertaker and keeper of Boot Hill.

The harness maker was considerably surprised at the news Zed brought, but the deputy contented himself with the bare statement that he wanted a pine box put together and the sheriff buried in the cemetery.

Zed crossed the street and went into Jack Beagle's saloon to see if Grat Lofthouse was still about. Beagle himself was behind the bar.

Zed leaned over the imitation mahogany. He'd known the saloon keeper for years. Beagle was a close-mouthed man, a master at keeping out of trouble, of never taking sides; skilled to a great degree at talking much when the occasion required and saying almost nothing.

"Cooperville's gone hog-wild again," observed the deputy as he twirled the glass of whisky between his long fingers.

"I've seen it that way before," said Beagle. "Many times."

Zed surveyed the room with the aid of the back-bar mirror.

"I was told you had a loafer in here by the name of Grat Lofthouse. A slick gent with nimble fingers."

"Grat left an hour ago," answered the saloon keeper. "The last I saw of him, he was ridin' out of town."

"Which way?"

"West!"

"I rather imagined," continued Zed, "that I would find Pretty Boy Bailey here soppin' up the liquor."

"Bailey left after Grat pulled out. He an' his men rode west, also."

"West!" exclaimed Zed. "The Circle W is east—due east!"

Beagle shrugged his shoulders. "*Quién sabe, señor!*"

"This dead fella, Frank Cornwall," observed Zed after a moment's pause. "What kind of a guy was he?"

"Ah!" breathed Beagle. "Now you're talkin' politics. Which lets me out!"

Zed paid for his drink, wandered

out the batwing doors and onto the veranda. He recrossed the street and entered the general store. This time Jim Cornwall was not behind the desk.

"Where's Cornwall?" asked Zed of one of the clerks.

"He left better than an hour ago," answered the young fellow.

"Where?"

"West!" finally grumbled the clerk, and went back to his work of sacking beans.

Zed went out again into the street. Next door to the general store was the tiny office of the murdered man. There was a sign upon it:

FRANK CORNWALL
Dealer in Mines, Land, and Cattle Swaps of All Kinds

The deputy peered in through a dirty window. He could make out a desk and four or five chairs. There was a partition halfway down the room that divided it in two. The door was locked. He moved down the narrow space that separated the shack and the general store. The shades in the rear room were tightly drawn. Through none of the three windows could he see into the room. The rear door was also locked. Zed thumped the walls. They were thick; made of unusually heavy planking. It seemed almost like a jail.

"It's queer," he mumbled as he walked out into the street and down toward the corral behind the Cooperville lockup, "but every one seems to be headin' west. Let's see, that would either lead to Talbot Hadden's Box C, or to the Cordova Hills an' to the Lucky Nellie Mine. I'm ridin' there myself. Where there's so much smoke there oughta be at least a little fire."

HE found the sorrel to be in fair shape and mending fast. He rubbed the horse down, saddled, and took the road east. Three miles he pounded the hard-packed roadway. Then he cut off to his left and headed in a westerly direction. At that moment he resolved to have nothing more to do with traveled roads. The country was too well adapted for an ambush. And the night before a man had thrown a knife at him under cover of darkness!

He rode as swiftly as the sorrel could travel. The way he took was roundabout; the noon hour had come and gone before he glimpsed the Box C ranch buildings through the trees ahead.

While he could expect no warm welcome from Talbot Hadden, there would be no quarrel or gun play unless he himself provoked it. He would be a traveler passing through, and as such Hadden would receive him. Such was Hadden's idea of hospitality. But what the rancher might do to him, should he meet him some place else, was another matter.

There was no one in the Box C ranch yard as Zed rode in and tied his horse to the hitch rail. He mounted the veranda, rapped on the door. There were footsteps on the inside. Then the door opened, and Talbot Hadden stood before him.

"I'm comin' in an' talk to you," said the deputy. "And the rest of it is, my friend, you're goin' to listen!"

Hadden shrugged his shoulders in dismay. They went into the long, low-ceilinged living room and sat down. The rancher frigidly offered a cigar; Zed took it.

"Hadden," he began, "Sheriff Osgood is dead! Some one slipped a knife in him as he slept."

"The devil!" exclaimed Hadden.

Zed took the note that he had found on the sheriff's body, unfolded it, and passed it to the rancher. Hadden read the crudely scrawled writing while Zed watched him closely. Other than a hardening of the lines around the mouth there was no noticeable change of expression.

"Say, Zed, you haven't it in mind, have you, that I wrote this note an' that I shoved the knife into the sheriff?"

"Not at all," answered the deputy. "If I'd thought that, I'd have come in shootin'! You had it in your heart to kill Osgood for thwartin' you in your stupid purpose of hangin' the prisoner, but Talbot Hadden would never stoop as low as this skunk did."

"Decent of you, Zed, to say so! I've done my share of quarrelin', not always on the right side either, but I've done it face to face."

"Another thing," continued Zed. "Your young friend, Durkee, is no longer in jail at Cooperville. I've turned him loose!"

Hadden's face was livid with anger. He sprang from his chair.

"What's that?" he roared.

"Sit down," quietly spoke Zed. "Hadden, you've been a fool long enough. Durkee's loose because I could no longer afford to guard him. But don't worry. I can lay hands on him whenever the time comes."

An inquiring look had come into the rancher's face.

"What time was it that you turned him loose, Zed?"

"Before midnight," answered Zed. "The sheriff was murdered some time after that. I know what you're goin' to say, Hadden. You think it may have been the miner who slipped the knife through Osgood's windpipe. Let's pass that idea for the moment an' proceed to somethin' else."

The rancher sat down, puffing furiously at his black stogie.

"We'll go back," continued Zed, "to the day when Frank Cornwall was killed. Frank's brother, Jim, an' Grat Lofthouse stopped here at your ranch on their way back to Cooperville with the prisoner, Durkee, to tell you of the murder. You weren't home. They left word. When you did come back to the ranch and heard the news, you worked yourself into such a lather that you gathered your riders and tore into town to hang the miner.

"That's the story as I gather it, but that ain't half the story. There's a missin' chapter some place. You can't tell me, Hadden, that you're so full of civic virtue that you would care to shoot a sheriff merely to have the pleasure of hangin' a man who was accused of murder.

"Of course, there's your daughter, Muriel. I understand that angle of it, too. You didn't want the marriage to go through. Very well then, why didn't you just sit back an' let the law take its course? That would have been the sensible thing to have done. Muriel couldn't marry him while he was in jail. Thus I figure that there was some personal reason for you to take immediate physical revenge on Durkee. If that reason had existed prior to the miner's arrest, you would have taken it then. But it didn't. The reason bobbed up coincident with the arrest of George Durkee. Hadden, I want you to tell me just what that reason was."

The beginning of a smile was playing on Hadden's lips, and admiration showed plainly in his eyes.

"You're pretty good at puttin' two an' two together, Zed!" he

mumbled. "But they're certain things a parent doesn't talk about. Things he keeps locked in his own heart an' settles in his own way."

Zed rested a hand on the rancher's arm.

"Hadden," he slowly murmured, "the finger of suspicion points at you. I would hate to believe that you knew of Frank Cornwall's death before his brother told you of it. Perhaps you're tryin' to cover up your own guilt!"

"Now that's a confounded lie!" shouted Hadden. "I had no idea that——"

"Very well," interrupted Zed. "Then tell me why it was you rode into Cooperville. Why it was you suddenly got so excited."

"All right," finally agreed the rancher, after a lengthy silence. "If that's the way it stands, I'll tell you. I was comin' in that night from off the north range. There was a Mexican waiting there for me by the corral.

"I'd never seen the man before, but he said his name was Pedro and that he had important information. He beat around the bush for a while. Seemed half scared to death. There's no use repeatin' that. But the substance of what he said was this:

"One day, three weeks before, he'd been up in the Cordova Hills. He'd seen my daughter there. She'd met Durkee. There was a deserted cabin. It started to rain. Durkee an' my daughter were in that cabin for hours. When Muriel came out, she was cryin'. The Mexican said he had a daughter of his own. He knew how those things were. And so——" Hadden's voice trailed off; his face was very red.

"An' so," put in Zed, "you thanked the man an' came up to the house where they told you about the slayin' of Frank Cornwall. Forthwith, with murder in your heart, you rode to Cooperville. Hadden, it appears to me that you fell for an unreasonable story.

"In the first place, what if Muriel *did* go up into the Cordova Hills, what if she *did* meet Durkee? They love each other, don't they? And what of it, if they went into a deserted cabin when it started to rain? Would you expect them to stay outdoors and get soaked?

"This strange Mexican came along at a surprisingly opportune moment, Hadden. Too opportune! Why did he wait three weeks to tell you?"

There was a look of uncertainty now on the rancher's face.

"You think then, Zed, that mebbe Durkee's in the clear? Both as regards my daughter an' the murder?"

"As far as Muriel is concerned, I'm sure of it," answered Zed.

"But if the miner didn't kill Cornwall, who did?" asked the rancher.

"George Durkee," answered Zed, "would not have sent Pedro, the Mexican, here to talk to you. He's not a complete idiot. Think that over, Hadden, when you've nothin' else to do."

THERE were sounds of light footsteps on the veranda. The front door opened, and Muriel Hadden came in. Talbot Hadden and the deputy stood up. She looked coldly at her father, but when she saw Zed Summers, she smiled.

"Zed!" she whispered. "Where's George? You've left him alone there in the jail? I'm afraid!"

"He's miles an' miles away from Cooperville," Zed quickly assured her, "cached away in a safe hidin' place."

"I can take food and clothing to him?" she asked. "I'll be careful."

"Young lady, you can do nothin' of the sort," growled Zed. "It's my wish that you stay within the four walls of this house. In fact, it's my command."

"Listen, daughter," interrupted the rancher, "what's happened hasn't altered the situation between you an' Durkee at all. You can go to your room."

The girl obeyed her parent without question. Zed could hear her climbing the stairs, then the opening and closing of her bedroom door.

"You have entirely forgotteen, haven't you, Hadden," put in Zed, "that you were once young and that your blood ran warm?"

"I know what's good for her!" was the quick retort. "There's only one man in these parts who's in a position to marry her. An' he's not a poor miner. Young Bailey's the man. He knows his cows, he knows his land, and he can support her in the comfort she's accustomed to."

Zed inwardly breathed an enormous sigh of relief. It was clear to him that Hadden must know nothing of the finding of that rich mother lode in the Lucky Nellie Mine. The rancher was no dissembler. Talbot Hadden had been used as a cat's-paw by some cleverer mind. That seemed to be a reasonable explanation.

"I'm willin' to let the law take its course as far as Durkee goes," said Hadden. "If he can prove his innocence, let him! I'm droppin' out of the whole business."

"Don't fool yourself," interrupted Zed. "You're right in the middle of this whole sorry mess. You couldn't drop out if you wanted to. In the first place, you didn't lynch the miner as the man who sent the Mexican to you expected you to do. That means that somebody's more than provoked with you. That somebody is the man or possibly men who murdered both Sheriff Osgood an' this Frank Cornwall.

"In the second place, *I'm* marked for death! Right now I'm here in your own sittin' room. It's a hundred to one that somebody saw me come here. I've talked to you. There's no tellin' what I've told you. You may now know too much. It's my rough guess, Hadden, that from this minute you're marked with the same brand that I am."

"There may be reason in what you say," admitted Hadden. "I'd hate to think——"

"And so it follows," continued Zed, "that you're joinin' my posse."

"What posse?"

"You an' me, Hadden! We're the posse. An' we're ridin' together to the trail's end."

"Damned if I will!" growled the rancher. "I'll move no foot of mine to help clear that ground grubber, Durkee!"

Zed Summers had taken something bright and shiny from his pocket. He reached over and pinned the six-pronged emblem on the rancher's vest.

"The star of Cordova County," said Zed. "It's the badge of your authority. The emblem of a man."

"Well—well!" slowly mumbled Hadden. His mouth twisted into a half smile. "If you put it that way, I'll do it. I'll do it with the distinct understanding that I'm doin' it for you alone, an' not for any one else on earth!"

"That's fine!" answered Zed. "That's O. K. with me. Come on! We'll be about it!"

CHAPTER VI.

BURIED ALIVE.

A QUARTER of an hour and the deputy and Hadden were riding west toward the Cordova Hills. Zed's eyes restlessly roamed the horizon. When their path led near a clump of boulders or a group of trees, they abruptly altered the course and passed by at a safe distance.

"Been up here lately?" asked Zed.

"Naw! Not since about six months ago when I told Durkee that if he ever set foot on Box C ground again, I'd blow his head off."

Shortly they had left the flat, wooded ground behind and were in the brush-covered foothills. They were climbing steadily; Fish Ridge lay directly ahead.

"It would have taken a miner to name a good-lookin' hill a fish, wouldn't it?" growled Hadden.

Another hour and they could see a cabin through the brush ahead of them.

"That's the place," volunteered the rancher. "Lucky Nellie! That's a joke!"

"Gentle," urged Zed. "We'd better take it easy. The wrong man may be there."

They left their horses in the creek bottom and went up the rise on foot. A hundred yards and they could see the entrance to the mine tunnel, a great pile of rock that formed the dump, a small pole corral, and the cabin. The door of the latter stood open.

"Plenty of black buzzards around," offered Hadden, pointing to the birds wheeling about in the blue sky overhead. "Somethin's dead. It can't be Cornwall, because we buried him a week ago."

Suddenly there came the low growl of a dog from the brush to their right. Then the animal set up a frightful howl. Zed forced his way through the tangled growth, Hadden following close behind.

"Merciful heavens!" exclaimed the rancher. "It's a dead man!"

The dog, evidently guarding the body of its master, was snarling and snapping its jaws, making quick lunges at them. But the animal had little strength. A minute and it was slumped down on its haunches, howling dismally but unable to get up. Its bloodshot eyes were like points of fire.

"The hound's half starved," muttered Zed.

Swiftly the deputy hurried back to his horse. He took hard bread from his saddlebag and a tin cup, which he filled with water at the creek. Then he approached the dog, arms outstretched, speaking to the animal with sympathy and understanding. A moment and the gaunt hound was eating from his hand, lapping water from the cup.

The dead man lay outstretched upon his stomach. One side of his face was visible.

"Looks like the old miner who has a prospect on the other side of the ridge," said Hadden. "His name's Adolph Drafus."

"Thanks," mumbled Zed. "It's like Durkee said. He told me I would find the body here."

"Shot in the back!" exclaimed the rancher. "Durkee must have done it! Miners seem to have a habit of doin' such things. That an' usin' axes on their victims."

The deputy made no reply. He began to circle the body, looking for tracks or whatever else he could find, getting farther and farther away with each revolution. There were plenty of tracks, far too many to be of the slightest value. That Drafus had been shot from ambush

was self-evident; nothing else was clear at all.

"We'll quit this," Zed finally said to his companion. "We'll find where Frank Cornwall's body lay."

THEY searched for half an hour before they found the spot. The grass was trampled down and bore dark-brown stains of blood. There were signs of a struggle. Branches had been broken from the bushes near by. The place of conflict was a good six feet in diameter.

Zed was on his hands and knees examining the grass. Something attracted his attention.

"By the way, Hadden," he asked, "what color hair did Frank Cornwall have? Blond, auburn, or brunette?"

"Black," answered the rancher. "As black as the inside of your hat."

"Singular," mumbled Zed. "There're any amount of red hairs here. Short, rather bristly red hairs. I haven't found a black one yet. Not a single one."

Hadden showed but scant interest while Zed carefully picked up a dozen or more of the red hairs and put them between the pages of a notebook that he carried in his hip pocket.

"So much for that," mumbled the deputy. "Now we'll see what the mine looks like. I've a hankerin' to see the workin' face of that drift."

"I'd rather be shot than go underground," said Hadden. "I'm no prairie dog."

On their way to the mine entrance they stopped at Durkee's cabin. It was a neatly arranged room, clean and spotless. Along one wall ran a long shelf, well filled with books that had obviously been read many times.

"Considerable of Durkee's life," observed the deputy, as he looked the titles over, "was lived above his ears."

"I never saw a book fella I had any use for," said Hadden. "Give me action, shorthorns, an' the open!"

The deputy was standing in the door of the cabin, looking down the brush-covered slope toward the creek bottom. Within the narrow confines of that little draw, two men had died. Zed turned to his companion.

"You saw Cornwall before they buried him, Hadden?"

"Yeah. That is, I saw part of him. They had his face an' the middle of him covered. He was no sight that anybody wanted to look at. I saw his boots an' pant legs. They were covered with blood. The way I gathered it, they buried him just the way they found him."

The two men walked the scant forty yards to the entrance of the tunnel and entered. Ten or twelve feet and they came to a heavy plank door that completely blocked the passageway. There was a massive padlock. Zed took the key that Durkee had given him and sprung the lock. The door groaned dismally on its rusty hinges as they pulled it open. Beyond lay an intense, inky blackness. Zed found a miner's lantern, put a match to the wick, and adjusted the flame.

Twin wires ran along the floor of the tunnel on the right-hand side.

"What in the world are those for?" asked Hadden. "I don't like the looks of 'em."

"They're the wires that Durkee used to fire his shots with," explained the deputy. "A miner bores his holes in the working face, puts in the sticks of dynamite, connects the wires, and then fires the shots

from the outside with a blastin' machine. It's much the safer way."

Sixty feet from the entrance they came to a section of the tunnel that had been timbered overhead. Zed inspected it with the aid of the lantern.

"There's a fault in the rock here," he said. "Look! The formation above is loose. It'd be a bad spot to be under if there was an earthquake."

"I don't care for this at all," mumbled Hadden. "I like the blue sky overhead an' green grass beneath my horse's hoofs."

"I'll go in alone," offered Zed.

"Shut up!" growled the rancher. "I'm comin' with you!"

LONG minutes and they came to the end of the drift. Zed held the lantern up to the working face. He gasped with surprise.

"Gold, Hadden! See it! Free gold an' it's in free-millin' quartz—the ideal combination! Durkee said it would run thousands of dollars to the ton. Durkee knew what he was talkin' about!"

"Heavens an' earth!" gasped Hadden, as he got a closer look. "There's enough metal there to start a bank!"

"The vein runs crosswise of the drift," continued Zed. "It may run for a hundred yards or a hundred feet or mebbe for a mile. Think of it, Hadden! A mile of this stuff! It might be a regular mother lode!

"Listen, now, would Durkee have taken the chance of killin' a man," muttered Zed, speaking more to himself than to the rancher, "just after he'd discovered a fortune like this? Ten men could have shared it with him, an' there would have been enough for each of them!"

"Sounds reasonable," admitted Hadden. "Let's get out of here. I crave the sunshine."

The deputy could see no reason to tarry longer although the sight of the treasure fascinated him. They retraced their steps, were halfway to the tunnel entrance when suddenly a great rush of air hit them in the face. It knocked them flat upon their backs!

The explosion was terrific, earsplitting, terrifying beyond description. Zed thought that he'd either been killed or maimed beyond repair. Dust stifled him. The lantern had been blown from his hand. The inky blackness closed in around him like a shroud. He was conscious of hearing falling rock and ripping timbers. Then silence came, a silence so intense that it seemed to strangle him.

"Hadden!" shouted Zed.

"Good gosh!" groaned the rancher. "What's happened?"

"Explosion!" mumbled Zed. "We've gotta keep our wits about us! We'll need 'em all. My guess is that we've been cut off from the outside!"

Another groan from Hadden as his teeth chattered. "Lead the way, Zed! I'll play the game out!"

"There may be no way to lead," admitted the deputy. "Search your pockets for matches."

They took an inventory. Zed had an even dozen. Hadden could find fifteen. The rancher struck one. Zed groped around through the rapidly settling dust and found the lantern. The chimney had been broken, and the coal oil had leaked out. As the match sputtered and went out, he dropped the useless thing. Zed and Hadden felt for each other in the darkness.

"Grab hold of me," said Zed. "I'll feel my way along the wall."

"Which way is the entrance?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," admitted the deputy. "All I know is

that this was no accident. Some one was waiting outside. They'd planned this. They knew I would visit the mine. Some one, Hadden, wants to be rid of me!"

"You turned Durkee loose! He knows all about dynamite!"

"Durkee isn't the only man in this country who knows about dynamite," Zed mumbled.

He stumbled and fell; Hadden dropped on top of him. When they had untangled themselves, the deputy struck a match. In the dim light he could see that the tunnel was completely blocked. Ends of shattered timbers struck out grotesquely from the mass of muck and rock. The match sputtered and went out.

"This is the fault I spoke of when we came in," said Zed. "The timbering runs a full twenty feet. It's all been blown down. The formation seems to be decomposed granite. It might take us a week to dig through it, given all the tools we needed, and then without timbering we might not get through at all. The man who planted that charge of explosive knew this mine."

"Young Durkee knew——"

"So did Frank Cornwall," added Zed, "but he's dead! Then there was the original owner of the mine. And goodness knows how many more. Take my hand," continued the deputy, "an' we'll explore the workin's. There may be a ventilating shaft. There may be some way out."

The rancher was trembling.

"Devil of a way to die, ain't it?" he whispered.

ZED ground his teeth in futile rage. Both he and the rancher were very near the point of desperation. A moment and they might be entirely berserk, clawing insanely at that mass of rock that blocked the tunnel. If reason should desert them, they were surely lost!

"Steady!" mumbled Zed. "I've been in worse spots before, an' so have you. Less than a day ago we faced each other with drawn guns. The world is queer!"

"I wish with all my soul that you had killed me," grumbled Hadden.

A foot at a time they retraced their steps. Twenty feet stretched out until it seemed a mile, as they felt their way along the rocky wall.

"I would trade ten years of my life for five minutes in the open air," said Hadden.

"Steady! Steady!" whispered Zed.

Zed's outstretched hand touched the working face of the drift. Suddenly he was conscious of a current of air. It was moving against his face, moving against his hand. Cool air! A great hope rose in his breast.

"You're tremblin'," spoke up Hadden.

"Strike another match," said Zed. "I'm afraid that I would drop it."

Hadden struck the match, held it out before him.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the rancher. "There's a hole there in the workin' face! It wasn't there before!"

"Mister"—Zed chuckled—"the Lucky Nellie Mine was not named that for nothing."

As the match burned out, he reached his hand through the hole. It was something over a foot and a half in diameter. By a tight squeeze, a man could get through. He was really trembling now and was wiping cold sweat from his forehead.

"What's the meanin' of it?" gasped the rancher.

"Durkee told me," explained Zed, "that he was driftin' through the

ridge toward Old Man Drafus an' that Drafus was driftin' toward him. Both thought they were gettin' near each other. Well, they were! Less than a foot separated them. That explosion back at the fault was so strong that it knocked a hole through the dividing wall. The air in the tunnel was compressed terrifically. An' the quartz is relatively soft; free-millin' stuff. See, you can break some of it off."

"Then we can get into Drafus's mine?" interrupted Hadden.

"If we can get through the hole, we can," answered Zed.

Zed shoved his shoulders through the opening. It was a tight fit. He wriggled through as best he could while Hadden pushed at him from the other side of the rock wall. He thought for a moment that he was stuck for good, but finally he made it! He dropped down with a thump on the rocky floor of a tunnel.

The rancher came through next, Zed tugging at him, pulling him by the arms. A moment and they were both standing.

Once more the deputy struck a match, held it close up to the working face. Gold sparkled in the white quartz.

"Drafus found the mother lode, too!" said Zed. "It was a joint discovery by him an' Durkee! An' now —Drafus is dead!"

More matches sputtered, and Zed found a lantern. There was a single jack, too. Catching up the heavy sledge, the deputy and the rancher began walking toward the entrance. Presently they came to a closed door. It was similar to the one they had encountered in the Lucky Nellie and locked from the outside. Zed put down the lantern and attacked it with the single jack.

The sound of his blows echoed and reëchoed through the long tunnel. The thick pine planks were stout and well put together. Shortly Zed yielded the long-handled hammer to the rancher. Hadden fell to work with a will. A quarter of an hour and they had made a passageway. Stumbling through the opening, they ran for the entrance.

Night had come. The sky was overcast. Storm clouds were moving in from the north. Hat off, Hadden stood with his face raised to the heavens.

"Summers," said the rancher, "I'm takin' an oath. I'm goin' to find the man who set off that blast an' I'm goin' to kill him!"

"If you do," answered the deputy, "you will have found the man who killed Frank Cornwall!"

CHAPTER VII.

TROUBLE ON THE BOX C.

ZED SUMMERS and Talbot Hadden stood for a moment beside Adolph Drafus's little shack and rested themselves. With a sigh, the rancher said:

"I suppose that we'll have to hoof it back to the ranch. Those buzzards who set off the blast would have been bound to have taken our horses."

"On the contrary," mumbled Zed, "whoever was over there wouldn't have touched our nags with a ten-foot pole. The man or men, or whoever it was, would want to cover up their tracks."

"I hope you're right," said the rancher. "I'm sure no good on my feet!"

They began climbing up through the brush that covered Fish Ridge.

"You make more noise than seventeen deer," objected Hadden. "Those men may still be around here."

"Not a chance," said Zed. "By now, they're on the hunt for Durkee."

"Durkee—my great-grandmother!" exclaimed the rancher. "I still think he's the guy we're after."

"You're not much good at puzzles, Hadden. There're a lot of pieces in a puzzle an' they all have to fit together. Not just a couple or three of them. We now have more pieces than when we came to the mine.

"For instance, we now have the motive more definitely established. There's a fortune below us here in this ridge. At least three men that I know of knew about it. Drafus, Cornwall, an' Durkee. The first two are dead, an' the last-named is still among the living. At least, I hope he is. It's my notion that there's some one else who knew about it. A greedy man knew about it, Hadden. A very greedy man. We must look for a fellow who would kill for money.

"Consider the situation: Durkee finds Drafus murdered there in the brush by his cabin one mornin'. He searches the hillside carefully for some trace of the killer. His nerves are high-strung and sensitive all that day. He would hear the slightest noise. He does not find Cornwall's body although it is supposed to be within a hundred yards of Drafus's corpse. Nor does he hear anything unusual until Jim Cornwall an' Grat Lofthouse come up an' take him into Cooperville."

"The trouble with you," interrupted Hadden, "is that you believe what Durkee's told you. That's a mistake. The man's a liar!"

"I believe what he said," repeated Zed, "because that Mexican, Pedro, came to see you at a too opportune moment. Much too opportune, Hadden. I grant that the miner would have profited by Drafus's death an' by Cornwall's death. But this greaser, Hadden, this Señor Pedro is the fly in the soup. It's always somethin' like that. Some seemingly little thing that accounts for everything!"

Silence fell between them. They came down the ridge to Durkee's shack. The door still stood open. Drafus's faithful dog set up a howl from the brush.

"Poor pooch!" muttered Zed. "It'll have to keep up its guard a few days longer."

Swiftly they moved down to the creek bottom. Zed whistled softly. There came an answering whinny from his sorrel. Both horses were there, exactly as they had left them.

Zed and the rancher mounted and began picking their way down the draw in the darkness. It would be slow going until they hit the open, wooded country that bordered the Box C.

"Seems like we've run into a stone wall," said Hadden.

"All walls have cracks in them," replied Zed.

Midnight came and went. They were making better time now. Hadden rode out in front because he knew the country better.

Two o'clock!

"The next rise an' we'll see the ranch house," murmured Hadden. "Of course the lights will all be out."

They mounted the rise, were on the crest of a ridge.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the rancher. "What's the matter now?"

The lights in the house were anything but out. Indeed, it seemed as though there were a lamp in every window.

"It can't be on my account," continued Hadden. "I told the housekeeper that I mightn't be back for

three, four days. I'm out lots of nights. Muriel! Maybe it's——"

HADDEN had sunk the spurs. Zed touched the sorrel in the flanks and raced up beside the rancher, his horse running belly down. They continued thus until they were within two hundred yards of their destination, then Zed reached out and caught the bridle of the rancher's roan.

"Turn loose!" shouted Hadden.

But Zed did not loosen his grip; with his powerful arm he brought the quivering animal to a standstill.

"We've got to use our heads, my friend," the deputy quickly explained. "No tellin' what may have happened here. Any one of two dozen things. But remember this: You an' I are supposed to be dead! We're supposed to be buried alive up there in that mine. Maybe we can take advantage of that fact. If we go bustin' in there like a couple of idiots, we'll lose all the advantage we may have gained. Mebbe nothin' serious has taken place at all. Mebbe your housekeeper has the stomach ache."

Hadden calmed down instantly. "You think of a lot of things, don't you, Zed!"

Men were running here and there around the front of the ranch house, out of the bunk house, and toward the corrals. Talbot Hadden slid to the ground.

"Leave the horses here an' follow me," he said.

Quickly he made his way to the clump of sycamores that stood close up by the west wall of the ranch house. The side window of the sitting room was open; yellow light came streaming through. The sounds of excited voices came from within.

Silently Zed and the rancher hoisted themselves into the wide-spreading crotch of the largest tree. They could see inside the room and hear what was being said.

It was a strange sight that met their eyes and under less stern circumstances would have been a laughable one. There was the half-hysterical housekeeper in her huge yellow nightcap and red wrapper, barefooted cowboys clothed only in their undershirts and overalls—confusion everywhere. The old woman was repeating her story in a high-pitched voice to a new arrival.

As the import of what she had to say soaked in, Zed gripped the rancher's arm with his fingers.

"Easy, Hadden! Easy!" he whispered.

It was indeed a tale to make a father's blood run cold. The way she told it was that three men had entered the house through a window off the veranda, by the simple expedient of raising it. They had gone to Muriel Hadden's room on the second floor, had seized the girl and carried her away.

Dick Donovan, the foreman, shot questions at her like he would slugs from a blazing .45. "They gave her time to dress?"

"I dunno," answered the housekeeper. "Her clothes were laid out on a chair beside the bed. They're gone. Boots an' everything. They were ridin' clothes."

"You saw the men?"

"I thought I was dreamin'. Heard a scream. Got up an' lit a lamp. Came out into the hall. There they was, the three of them. I like to died of fright. One man stepped up an' blew down the chimney of the lamp I was carryin'. I couldn't see no more. There was no light to see by."

"You recognized them?"

"Land of mercy, no! They had

handkerchiefs over their faces with holes cut for their eyes. Hats pulled down. Nothin' familiar about any of 'em."

"How were they dressed?"

"One was in store clothes, an' the other two were dressed like ordinary rannies—just the same as you see every day. Blue denims, I think."

"You saw Muriel?"

"One of the men was carryin' her. They had something white over her face. Looked like a bed sheet. She was kickin' somethin' terrible."

"You just stood there with your mouth open, I suppose?" continued the foreman.

"I did not!" exclaimed the housekeeper. "One of the men said that if I opened it, he'd kill me! But just as soon as they'd gone, I screamed. I never screamed so much in my life."

"I heard her," spoke up one of the men. "It happened I was outside the bunk house, halfway to the horse corrals. I'd been awake for a while. Thought I heard a horse down. I got up to investigate."

"Then you saw the skunks ride away?" interrupted the foreman.

"Saw—nothin'!" exclaimed the cowboy. "It was as dark as the inside of an oven. There was a cloud over the moon. But I heard 'em mount up an' ride away. They were ridin' like hell! They headed due east!"

"Every man get his horse!" shouted Donovan. "Step lively!"

There was a break for the outside. Only the housekeeper remained in the sitting room.

Hadden let out a groan and started to get down out of the tree, but Zed restrained him.

"Not one chance in a thousand of those fellas pickin' up a trail on a night like this," whispered the deputy. "They'll get plenty of exercise, but that's all. You an' me, Hadden, can play a longer hand than that. We'll ease away in the darkness without a soul seein' us. When morning comes, we'll pick up the trail of those three horses. It'll be hard to find, but we can do it. And when we find it, we'll ride it to the end. There's something more afoot now than just the murder of three men."

"You expect me to sit idle until daylight comes? Why, man alive, my daughter's gone!"

"Three men took her," mumbled Zed. "And one of them was dressed in city clothes."

"Well, what of it?"

"I was just wonderin'," whispered the deputy. "Just wonderin'."

As Zed and the rancher climbed down from the tree, there was great confusion down by the horse corrals. Shortly the men were mounted. With a loud whoop they set off in an easterly direction. The sound of their horses' hoofs died slowly in the distance.

Zed and Hadden sought their mounts, climbed wearily into the saddles. They retraced their steps, moved back toward the Cordova Hills. Two miles they rode, and then Zed halted in the bottom of a small coulee.

"This is far enough," he said. "We'll rest here. Get some shut-eye, Talbot, while the gettin's good."

"Shut-eye!" exclaimed Hadden. "Summers, you've never had a daughter!"

Zed lay down. The last thing he remembered was seeing Talbot Hadden sitting there beside him, his head between his knees, waiting patiently for the coming of another day.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE AMBUSH.

HADDEN aroused the deputy as the sky turned crimson in the east. It was still too early to be about; they sat there on their haunches munching hard bread.

"I've racked my brain for hours," said Hadden, "an' I can see no reason why three men should carry off my daughter."

"It's pure conjecture," said Zed, "but I think it'll work out something like this: Durkee is the man they're after. Muriel is only incidental. From her they hope to gain knowledge of his hiding place. They're desperate, those three kidnapers, so desperate they're playing the gamble of their lives.

"It means, Hadden, that both you an' your daughter are marked for death. Death because you know too much, or they think you do. The girl's only chance is to stall them off, to lead them here an' there in search of Durkee and to do it so cunningly that their patience will not become exhausted before we reach her. The stake they're playin' for is undisputed ownership of those two mines, the Lucky Nellie an' the Little Dollar."

"Let's go!" said the rancher. "It's light enough for us to see."

They mounted and started riding east, keeping well away from the ranch house. The country was rolling and partly wooded; concealment was relatively easy. When opposite the ranch house, they began easing more and more to their left, hoping to cross the trail of the kidnapers. It had been agreed between them that Zed was to search the ground; the rancher was to scan the horizon and give warning at the first sign of man or beast.

Zed was looking for the trail of three horsemen, riding in a compact body as they would ride in the dead of night. An hour and they were well north of the Box C domicile. Zed had crossed numerous trails, one a particularly wide one made, no doubt, by the Box C riders in their mad dash into the night. But none of them had satisfied him, had seemed worth following.

"We're too far north," said the deputy. He altered the course and headed in a southeasterly direction.

"Hurry! Hurry!" exclaimed the rancher. "Do you want me to go stark mad?"

But Zed Summers was not to be hurried. This time he must surely find it. He rode slowly for miles, his eyes never leaving the ground for more than a second at a time. Finally he came down into the flat floor of a basin. The ground was moist, the grass short-clipped by grazing cattle.

"Ah!" suddenly burst out Zed. He slipped from the saddle and was on the ground.

There before him were fresh tracks made by flying hoofs. While the rancher fumed with impatience, the deputy continued with his study. For two hundred feet he walked across the basin, stopping every ten feet or so to look more closely.

"Well," Zed finally announced, "we've found what we were lookin' for. But instead of three horses, there're four. The fourth is a pony, carrying light. They had a mount for Muriel. Each of the three horses has a distinguishin' mark. One throws its right forefoot too much to the left. Another has a shoe that is a fraction out of line. The other has the queerest calk on the off hind hoof I've ever known a blacksmith to turn out."

He started to point out these dif-

ferences as they showed there in the moist ground, but Hadden had not the patience to listen. The rancher had already put spurs to his gelding and was riding swiftly up out of the basin. The deputy touched his sorrel's flanks and followed.

"Haste sometimes make a lot of waste," he mumbled to himself. "But, then, I've never had a daughter."

AN hour they rode, the trail spread wide before them. The topography was changing now. The rolling country was flattening out, trees were not so numerous, but the boulders, both in size and numbers, were increasing on all sides. Great, round rocks they were, the terminal moraine of some prehistoric glacier that had crept in from the north countless centuries before.

Presently they came to a spot between two boulders where the grass was stamped down and there were many hoof prints.

"Hold it!" said Zed, reining in. "It's time we gave our horses a chance to breathe."

They dismounted and inspected the ground.

"Here's the place where they first halted," continued the deputy. "I imagine it was about sunrise. Here's where they first labored with Muriel, tryin' to get the girl to tell them where Durkee was. Hello! What's this?"

There was a piece of white cloth hanging to the branch of a low bush. Zed picked it up and looked more closely. There was a hem on one side, neatly done by hand. He could well imagine it to be a small portion of a woman's handkerchief.

"Perhaps it *did* belong to her!" admitted Hadden. But he was impatient to be gone.

"If the trail turns," said Zed, "we'll know that Muriel told them somethin' an' that they believed her."

They followed the imprint of the hoofs a scant fifty feet, and then the trail *did* turn. It swung off sharply to the left.

"Good girl," mumbled the deputy. "Good girl."

Not many miles away was the pear thicket in which Durkee had been told to hide. They were heading away from it now. That might mean anything or nothing. Another thing was very clear: The speed of the cavalcade ahead had slowed noticeably. Zed could imagine that the girl was trying to delay them as much as possible, but not too much. That would certainly be in her best interest. The young woman was certainly using her head.

Presently he saw something white fluttering beside the trail. Zed leaned far over in his saddle and scooped it up as he went by. It matched the piece of cloth that he had found between the boulders. Muriel was doing her best to mark the trail, to let them know that she was still alive.

An hour passed as they wound their way in and out among the boulders, and then they came to the spot where the kidnapers had made their second stop. This seemed to have been of longer duration than the first.

"The trail's warm an' gettin' fresher all the time," observed Zed. "See how the earth hangs there on the edge of that heel print. We've got to have our ears an' eyes about us, Hadden, or we may come upon them before we know it."

"I'll ride the skunks down!" rasped Hadden, between parched lips. "I'll ride them down—my two guns blazin'!"

Again the trail turned, this time in a more easterly direction. The rancher set the pace and he set a fast one. Zed was full of misgivings, but he could have slowed Hadden only by hitting him on the head with a gun barrel. Zed knew now that they were riding around the circumference of a rough circle. Doubling back. Slowly back.

Side by side he and Hadden raced up through a narrow defile, a great jumble of boulders on either side. All in a second Zed saw the quick movement of a Stetson in among the rocks. Then his movements were automatic and as swift as forked lightning. With a mighty effort he pulled his sorrel to the right, sent the animal crashing into Hadden's gelding. On that instant, came the crash of gunfire! Both horses stumbled and fell and in so doing, saved their rider's lives.

ZED and the rancher were out of their saddles as the horses fell. They dropped to the ground as slugs whistled over and around them, sought shelter in among the boulders. The two horses staggered up, went trotting down the defile, empty stirrups beneath their bellies.

The firing ceased as quickly as it had begun.

"Missed 'em!" he heard some one shout. "Keep 'em covered while we mount!"

Then came the high-pitched scream of a woman's voice. Her cry was cut off before it had been half completed; it seemed as though some one might have clapped a hand over her mouth.

Hadden half got up from his place of concealment. Zed forced him down again.

"It'll do Muriel no good for you to get your head blown off!"

"We were ridin' too fast," whispered Hadden. "Much too fast!"

Presently there came the clatter of hoofs. Then all was quiet. Ten more minutes they waited, and then Zed gave the signal that it was safe for them to move. Still cautious, he darted in and out among the boulders, his two guns in his hands. None of the men had stayed behind.

"You recognized the man's voice who did the shoutin'?" questioned Zed.

"I've heard it sometime in the past," admitted Hadden, "but I can't just place it."

Their next thought was for the horses. They found them not far from the bottom of the defile. Other than slightly barked forelegs, neither horse was damaged.

Shortly Zed and Hadden took up the trail once more, riding now with greater caution. For hours they followed its twistings and turnings. Late afternoon and they saw a man sitting a horse at a considerable distance ahead of them. The fellow had his hands raised in token of surrender.

"Looks somethin' like George Durkee!" growled the rancher, as his voice shook with emotion. "If it is the skunk——"

"You'll do nothin' at all about it!" interrupted Zed. "The boy's still my prisoner an' don't forget that the man who tries to take him from me dies."

Hadden shrugged his shoulders in resignation and took his hands from his gun butts.

"Have it your own way, Zed, but there's a day of reckonin' comin'."

"Howdy, George!" said Zed, as they rode up. "You're a long ways from the pear thicket. How come?"

Durkee held out a sheet of paper in his hands.

"I just couldn't stay there an' do nothin'," explained the miner. "I been waitin' here better 'an an hour for you. I knew you were comin'."

"Thunderation!" growled the deputy. "How's that?"

"Read this. I found it here."

They all dismounted. Zed took the sheet of paper and read it, while the rancher looked over his shoulder and read it, too.

HADDEN TALBOT: You will quit the trail of your daughter's kidnapers right here at this spot if you ever want to see her alive again. The price you will pay to get her back is forty thousand dollars. We're desperate and we mean exactly what we say. To our knowledge you have much more money than that on deposit in the bank at Cooperville. But we'll be satisfied with the forty grand. It's up to you and this buzzard, Zed Summers, to ride to Cooperville and get the money. To-morrow the two of you will go to the pear thicket east of town and leave it at the spot indicated on the map which is drawn on the back of this piece of paper. You two know this country. You won't have a bit of trouble in finding the place.

Listen, Hadden! If you make a funny move of any kind, your daughter's going to die! We'll be watching you!! Look out!!!

There was no signature, just a few unintelligible marks.

The rancher ground his teeth in rage and swore strange oaths as he finished reading the note. "I would give more than that to have my daughter back," he finally said. "Imagine Talbot Hadden payin' a bribe to any man! Yet I'd give the forty thousand if Muriel was safe at home." Suddenly his face hardened, and he was glowering at the miner. "This is entirely your fault, you——"

Zed had the rancher by the arm, his powerful fingers cutting into the flesh like rawhide thongs.

"Take it easy, Hadden!" urged the deputy. "Take it easy!"

"We're ridin' to Cooperville for the money," said Hadden, when his composure had returned. Once more he was looking at the miner, but this time rather quizzically. There was a kinder light in his eyes. "What Muriel can see in you, Durkee, I can't understand. But there's no fathoming a woman's heart. I'm thinkin' of the girl's mother—my wife—now dead. As strange as it may seem—she married me——" His voice trailed off.

Zed was no longer listening. He did not say so, but it was clear to him that those kidnapers had slight intention of delivering the girl alive. Still, there was a slight chance that they might. It all depended on who they were; how low they'd sunk. The West was full of desperate men who would as soon shoot a man in the back as look at him. Y- those same men might hesitate about having a woman's blood upon their already unclean hands. The ransom was worth a try; it would provide a contact with the kidnapers, and, fortunately, Hadden had the forty thousand.

"Then all three of us will ride to Cooperville," announced Zed. "You, Talbot, an' I, an' Durkee."

Morning found them in the high brush on the outskirts of the town.

CHAPTER IX.

INSTRUCTIONS.

"RIDE into Cooperville alone," Zed told the rancher, as they drew rein in a gully, "and get your money. The bank won't be open yet, but you can rout out the banker an' get it anyway. I doubt if he has that much cash on hand but——"

"It's all in my private box," interrupted Hadden. "I keep more than that there for an emergency."

"Don't loiter," cautioned Zed, "or talk to any one. If somebody should ask you about Muriel, just shrug your shoulders an' keep on goin'. Durkee an' I will meet you on the road going east about half a mile out of town."

Hadden rode away and disappeared in the brush.

Zed and the miner had a cold and scanty breakfast, then they, too, mounted and began a half circle of the town toward the east.

"Tell me honest," asked Durkee, "do you think we'll ever see Muriel alive again?"

Zed gave his shoulders a toss. "We'll play the game the best we can, son. These men have the girl. She's worth money to them because her father is worth money. When they get the money, Muriel will be worth less to them than she is now. If they plan to take the forty thousand an' skip the country for good, they'll no doubt turn her loose. If they don't plan to skip the country, they'll take the forty thousand an' then——"

"—kill her!" groaned the miner.

"Such sharks as we're dealin' with usually plan to cover up their trail," admitted Zed. "That's where the finest kind of work comes in. To get the girl an' give them the money, all at the same time. There's where the danger lies."

It was a good two hours before the rancher met them.

"Got the money all right," said Hadden, as he came trotting up. "Got it in thousand-dollar bills. The banker was full of questions, but I shut him up. It wasn't none of his business, anyway."

They continued down the road. Shortly they quit the beaten path and cut off toward the northeast. For three hours they traveled steadily onward and by noon were among the boulders not far from the pear thicket. Zed drew rein.

"We're less than a mile, Hadden, from the spot where we were first ambushed. Accordin' to the map those scoundrels drew on the back of the note, there should be a tree here with a fresh blaze upon it."

They searched for some time and finally found the tree.

"Five hundred yards due east," said Zed.

They rode at a slow walk in the direction indicated. Zed raised a hand, and they drew up. He was pointing through the trees.

"There's the twin boulders, Hadden. The note said that the money is to be placed on a flat rock immediately between them. Which probably means that if the three of us ride in there together, none of us will come out alive."

"I've been worryin' over that for hours," admitted Hadden. "How am I to be sure that I will get my daughter in exchange for my money?"

"I'll take the money in alone," volunteered Durkee. "The notation on the map said that you and Summers were to walk in with it, put it on the rock, turn around, step off thirty paces, and stop with your backs turned. Then the kidnapers will come out of hiding, usin' Muriel as a shield, get the money, and then they will tell you when you can face around again after they're safely under cover of the boulders. That's what I made out of it."

"Two men with their backs turned," mumbled Zed, "and forty thousand layin' there on the rock. To my way of thinkin', we'd be two dead gents in about three seconds. No, there's a better way than that. There's got to be!"

They left the horses and pro-

ceeded on foot. Two hundred feet from the boulders Zed stopped.

"Hadden, see that clump of bushes over there at the right? You make tracks for them. From that point you can cover the rock where the money's to be placed. Give me the bills; all of them."

The rancher emptied his pockets while the deputy spoke to the miner:

"Durkee, you take position on the left-hand side. There's a clump of rock there. Get behind them an' watch yourself."

"What's the idea?" asked Hadden.

"I'm going in an' have a talk with those kidnapers," answered Zed. "If they shoot me—well, it'll be too bad."

His companions hesitated.

"Be about it!" growled Zed. "Take your places. We haven't got all day."

HADDEN and the miner took the positions that had been assigned them. Zed arranged the bills in his two hands; if they had not been of large denominations, he could not have held them. Then he started walking slowly toward the passageway that led between the boulders.

When fifty feet away he stopped and shouted:

"Hello, you kidnapers! Hello in there behind the rocks!"

Other than the echo of his own voice, there was no answer. But he had hardly expected any this early in the game. Holding the money above his head, he continued:

"I've come with the money! We want the girl! We want to be sure we're going to get the girl! Come out with handkerchiefs over your faces! We'll not harm you, but we won't turn our backs! That's unreasonable!"

Again Zed stopped and listened. Once more there was no sound but the echo of his voice. He continued:

"Our horses are two hundred yards from here! I'll put the money on the rock! I'll turn my back! Come out with the girl in front of you! Get the money an' be off! You can make your get-away without pursuit! Speak up, you men!"

Slowly Zed began to advance. The tension was terrific. He'd been in tight spots before but never one so tight as this. The stake was high. The outcome might well mean whether a young woman would live or die. Whether all of them would live or die. There was nothing to prevent those men in hiding from mowing him down, nothing but the slim fact that Durkee and the rancher would not also be in their line of fire.

"Come on!" thundered Zed, as the cords in his neck stood out. "What's the matter with you? Speak up—speak up like men!"

By now he was close up to the flat rock where the money was to be placed. With a distinct feeling of disheartenment he saw that there were several folded sheets of paper there on the rock held down by a small pebble. When the echo of his own voice had died away, there was no sound at all except the distant chirping of a squirrel. Stooping, he could make out what was printed on the topmost sheet:

The girl ain't here! Read the note! Follow the instructions!!!

Zed stuffed the money in his pockets, picked up the sheets of paper, and swiftly backed out of the defile. Hadden and the miner joined him. A cold chill ran up the

deputy's spine as he began to read the note aloud:

"The girl will be delivered at Cooperville upon payment of the forty thousand dollars. Unless these instructions are followed in the most minute detail, she will not be delivered. You will never even find her body.

"Talbot Hadden is to ride immediately from this spot to Cooperville. He is to go alone. Zed Summers is to remain at the exact spot where he now is for at least twenty-four hours If Summers goes to Cooperville before that time, the girl will not be delivered. Every move of yours will be watched.

"The delivery will be made sometime between two o'clock to-morrow morning and daybreak. Hadden is to engage a front room on the second floor of the Nugget Hotel. He is to do that immediately upon getting to Cooperville and is to remain in that room and not leave it until instructed to, nor is he to communicate with or speak to any one other than mentioned in this note.

"He is to come riding into Cooperville in the center of the street, go direct to the hitch rack in front of the hotel, dismount, tie his horse, and walk into the office.

"There will be a watcher in the office to see that Hadden communicates with no one except as directed. Hadden will hand over his guns to the proprietor and say these words: 'There was a fellow came in here to-day and engaged a room for me. I'm going up. Don't let anybody disturb me. I'm sleeping the clock around.'

"The room in question is on the right-hand side of the hall and is known as No. 4. When Hadden gets up to the room, he will pull a chair up to the window and sit there in plain view from the street below. He will continue to sit there until exactly sunset, when he will quickly light the lamp on the bureau and resume his seat, sitting so that his figure is illuminated in the window.

"The moon will be well up by midnight. When two o'clock in the morning comes, Hadden will blow out the light on the bureau, taking only a second to do it. Then he will raise the window and sit on the window sill in such a way that he will be in plain view from the street below at all times.

"Directly across the street from the hotel is Bill Wilson's blacksmith shop. Sometime after two o'clock there will be the flicker of a match there in front of the shop. It will burn only for an instant, so Hadden must watch closely. This is to be the signal for Hadden to leave the window and to come downstairs. He will move noiselessly and swiftly. We have calculated the time it should take him, and if there is a variation in that time, he will simply be walking to his death.

"Coming out of the hotel, he will hold his hands high above his head, the money clutched in his fingers. He is, of course, to be unarmed. At the first sign he is carrying a gun, we will fire on him without hesitation. Hadden is to walk straight across the street toward the blacksmith shop. Two men will step out from the shop and meet him. He will extend the money, keeping his arms straight out before him until he has been told to lower them.

"If the money is correct, Hadden will be told exactly what to do. The girl will be delivered unharmed a moment afterward.

"Hadden—follow these instructions to the letter. The slightest deviation from them, and you will never see your daughter again.

"Summers—stay out here among the boulders for a good twenty-four hours. Some one may have told you once that you were a man hunter. They were just kidding you. Folks will have their little jokes!

"In closing, keep this in mind: You may figure that there are only the three of us. You were never more mistaken!"

As Zed finished the reading of the note, his throat was dry, and perspiration stood upon his forehead. Hadden was trembling, and his face was white. The miner swore softly to himself.

"I'll pay the money an' get my daughter," Hadden growled, "go back to the Box C, and stay there for the balance of my life. It's none of my business who killed Frank Cornwall or Drafus or the sheriff. I want my daughter! Another thing, Summers," continued the rancher, "you an' Durkee are goin' to do just what this fellow says. You're stayin' here!"

"Oh, sure," said the deputy. "Of course. You ride into Cooperville

an' do just as the note says. Here, take it with you, so you can reread it on the way."

Hadden got his horse and mounted. By now most of the fire had gone out of him. He looked uncertainly at Zed.

"You don't think they're stringin' me, do you, Summers?"

Zed found it hard to answer, yet he forced the words: "You do just as they've told you to, Hadden. It's your best bet."

The rancher pocketed his roll of bills and rode slowly away.

Durkee spoke to Zed, and there was disappointment in his tone. "It seems to me, Summers," he said, "that if those fellows get the forty thousand, they'll keep Muriel and then want another forty or a hundred thousand."

"Son," said the deputy, "no man on earth ever spoke truer words than those."

CHAPTER X.

DOWN FROM ABOVE.

PRESENTLY Zed began a circle of the boulders. He came in from behind and found the place where a fresh camp had been made. Durkee stood back as the deputy searched the ground.

"Four people have been here," he announced. "Muriel an' three others. The kidnapers never had any intention of delivering the girl here, if they ever intend to deliver her at all. The move was made to get me out of the way and to get her into Cooperville under cover of darkness. She's there now. I'm satisfied of that."

"Why would they take her there?" exclaimed Durkee. "There would always be a chance of her being seen."

Zed shrugged his shoulders, but did not think it best to answer. He searched the ground in widening circles. Eventually he found the hoof prints of four horses. One was smaller than the others—Muriel's horse. The trail led off in the direction of Cooperville.

"Durkee," whispered Zed, "are you willing to risk everything on one desperate gamble? It'll be a single turn of the cards—to win or lose."

"If Muriel is the stake—I will!"

"Fine!" said the deputy. "Then we'll rest here until evening comes."

Twilight found them once more in the saddle. It was pitch-black and going onto ten o'clock when they raised the lights of Cooperville out of the brush ahead.

"You must do exactly as I tell you," cautioned Zed. "Not one move that I don't direct. In the first place Muriel's life hangs in the balance and in the second place the lives of the rest of us. We're dealing with desperate men. Men who would stoop to anything and have already stooped to all the crimes in the catalogue."

"If I knew who they were," whispered Durkee, "I could be more on my guard. It would help a lot."

"Who they are?" said Zed. "I wonder!"

They continued on in silence. It was nearly a mile from the town where Zed halted and slid from the saddle. Durkee followed his example. They tied their horses to a bush, in the bottom of a slight depression, and continued on foot. Zed led the way. They approached Cooperville from the south side, came in through a scattering of adobe dwellings.

The deputy moved slowly, avoiding all buildings. He figured that it was now somewhat after eleven o'clock. Lights were beginning to

blink out in residences as the occupants called it a day and went to bed.

Pausing every few feet to listen, they silently walked on until they were in the rear of the blacksmith shop that the kidnapers had mentioned. Zed was reasonably familiar with Wilson's horseshoeing establishment. As he stood there in the darkness, he racked his brain to remember the exact details.

There were a couple of horse corrals to the rear of it, then, near the street, the shop itself. There were no side walls, but there was a roof, a nearly flat roof that sloped gently to the rear. Inside were a couple of forges, anvils, racks for horseshoes and strap iron, piles of old and new wagon tires, and a tank of water for shrinking the latter onto wooden rims.

Zed stood by the corrals searching that shop for some signs of occupancy. Lights from the hotel across the street and from Jack Beagle's saloon, which was next door to the Nugget Hotel, gave some illumination. For many minutes he and Durkee stood there, but there was no sound from the shop. There was, however, a commotion of some sort going on in Beagle's barroom.

THE roof at the back end of the blacksmith shop came within six or seven feet of the ground. Zed felt his way along and found that the top of the high pole fence of the nearer corral was not more than three feet from the edge of the roof. His recollections had not been at fault. A man could climb that pole fence and step over onto the roof. But could he do it without being heard? That was something else again.

"Sit down on the ground an' pull off your boots," whispered Zed.

Horses in the corral had suddenly come to life. The nags were stamping restlessly about. Zed hoped that they would keep it up for a few moments more. It would serve to drown out any noise that he and Durkee might be so unfortunate as to make.

"I'm ready," breathed the miner.

"Climb up the corral an' onto the roof," directed Zed. "An' it'll be too bad if you slip an' fall, or make a racket."

Zed stood peering into the darkness, hands on the butts of his guns, as Durkee started up the pole corral. Five minutes passed, then Zed heard a whisper from above:

"I made it! I'm on the roof!"

Then Zed himself began to climb the corral. The poles creaked a little under his weight; he stopped and listened. Shortly his hands reached the topmost rung. Extending his foot, he found the roof. Then he gave a shove with his hands and stepped upon it.

For a second he thought that the whole structure was going to collapse. It swayed crazily, having very little lateral bracing. The building creaked in all its joints.

"On your hands an' knees," whispered the deputy. "Move up the roof an inch at a time."

Then began the slow process of crawling up that weather-beaten, warped, and poorly put together clapboard roof. A half hour it took before they could look over the edge and out into the street. Cracks were wide and numerous under them. There was one immediately beneath Zed's face, through which he could see the interior of the blacksmith shop.

Just as they reached the edge of the roof, the light in the office of the Nugget Hotel across the street began to dim. This meant that the

proprietor was about to go to bed. Zed saw a man's figure move across the room. A door slammed, a key grated in a lock. Sounds were carrying far in the still night air.

Directly above the office was a lighted window. Silhouetted against the yellow glow was the torso and head of Talbot Hadden. Zed breathed a sigh of relief. There had been a big doubt in his mind as to whether the rancher would ever get even this far. Hadden had been carrying forty thousand dollars and riding all those miles alone. It indicated one thing—perhaps the kidnapers intended this time to go through with the performance as they had outlined it.

Hadden wasn't moving a muscle. He just sat there grim and silent and as immobile as a statue. Zed watched him for a good half hour and could detect no movement whatever. It seemed almost as though the rancher had passed away there in his chair and that *rigor mortis* had set in before he could fall over.

Presently a half dozen men came out through the doors of the saloon. The lights in the barroom were being turned out one at a time.

Four of the men went to the hitch rack in front of the saloon, untied their horses, and rode away. The other two walked diagonally across the street toward the blacksmith's.

"They've got their plugs in the livery barn," reasoned Zed.

However, the two men stopped immediately below where the deputy and the miner lay. They were looking up at the window of the hotel in which Talbot Hadden sat.

"That guy must have forgot to go to bed," one of them said.

"Shucks!" exclaimed the other. "Looks a sight like Hadden of the Box C. My gosh, it is him!"

The voices continued, first one and then the other:

"Mebbe Hadden's gone kind of screwy. Losin' his daughter, the way he's done. I'll bet a nickel she's with that fella Durkee. The two of 'em more 'an likely ran off together. It wasn't no kidnapin'. It was a runaway marriage!"

"That was a dumb-headed thing for Summers to do—to turn the prisoner loose like he done."

"I'll say it was! The deputy bluffed Hadden out of lynchin' the prisoner an' then he up an' disappeared himself. Nobody's seen Zed for two days."

"Oh, he'll turn up again! More 'an likely he's tryin' to figure out who it was bumped off that mine promoter, Frank Cornwall. I figure that Durkee did it, an' so does most everybody."

"Summers must sure be sore that Osgood had a knife stuck in him. He thought a sight of the old man. They worked together when Summers lived here."

"Devil of a country this is gettin' to be, ain't it! Then there's that miner, Drafus, whose body was found up by the Lucky Nellie Mine an' who was buried in the cemetery this afternoon along with Sheriff Osgood's."

"Shucks! It'll take Summers the next ten years to clear up all them crimes. Devil of a country——"

"Jim Cornwall, the storekeeper, is settin' great store by that twin brother of Frank's who's now on his way down from Montana."

"Yeah. Come on, fella! Pick up your feet! We gotta get home!"

The two men were walking down toward the livery barn. Their voices died away. Shortly there came the sound of swiftly running horses. That, too, passed, and all was still again.

THE lights in the saloon had all been extinguished, the front door locked. The street was now in absolute darkness except for the dull glow that came from the hotel office and the brighter light from the room above it.

Zed was watching Hadden. Suddenly the rancher's arm moved, and then he got up and stretched himself.

The deputy fell to figuring where the kidnapers were concealed who were watching that lighted window across the street. The window could be plainly seen from Jim Cornwall's general store, from Frank Cornwall's office, from the blacksmith shop, from Pete Larson's harness shop, and from the livery barn. Five places where those men might be safely hidden.

Durkee stirred restlessly.

"Take it easy," whispered Zed into his companion's ear.

"My muscles! They're cramped! They're killin' me!"

"Grit your teeth," advised Zed, "an' think of a girl with blue eyes an' golden hair."

The minutes dragged, an agonizing, endless procession of them.

"It's two o'clock," mumbled Zed. "The moon's well up."

Hadden was standing now. Presently he raised the window and stuck his head through the opening. The hotel faced due north, thus the front was quite well illuminated by the moonlight.

Evidently satisfied with what he saw, Hadden stepped back into the room and blew out the lamp. Then he came back to the window and, sitting on the sill, leaned as far out as he could without falling.

The next thing in order would be some show of life in the blacksmith shop beneath. Zed pressed his eye to the crack beneath him but could make out nothing that looked like a man. Gradually he made out the forges, the anvils, and a great pile of wagon tires.

He had expected action much before this. One hour, two hours, three hours dragged by while he and Durkee lay there not daring to move. The physical torture was intense. Higher and higher the moon mounted in the heavens; hours passed, and still nothing happened.

The first blush of dawn was beginning to appear in the east. Another half hour and the town would begin to stir. If the kidnapers were going to act at all——

Some one was moving about in the blacksmith shop below. Zed could make out two men. They were treading their way between the forges and the anvils up toward the front of the shop. Presently the men stopped, seemed to hesitate. They walked a few feet more and were looking up at the hotel window.

Through the crack, Zed could see that both men wore black handkerchiefs over their faces. He strained his eyes for some sight of Muriel. The girl was nowhere to be seen.

A match flared in the cupped hand of the taller man! It sputtered only for a second and then went out. Durkee stirred. The boards creaked beneath him. Zed reached over and laid a hand on the miner's arm.

Zed shifted his gaze to the hotel. Hadden had seen the signal! He was standing. Then he quit the window.

The two men who wore the masks were standing on the plank walk directly below Zed and Durkee, their gaze riveted on the hotel door.

"I'll take the one on the left," breathed Zed into the miner's ear. "You take the one on the right. Get

slowly to your knees. When I raise my hand—jump! We've got to get them alive. It may be the only way to find the girl——" His voice trailed off, and his grip on Durkee's arm tightened.

The hotel door had opened. Hadden had come down from the room above. He stepped out on the veranda. He crossed it and was in the street. The rancher had his hands in the air and was coming steadily forward. In the uncertain light of early dawn Zed could see the rolls of bills tightly clutched in his long fingers.

A GLANCE below told Zed that each of the men had drawn guns. And they had moved directly out in front of the blacksmith shop, waiting for Hadden to finish crossing the street.

"Now's the time!" whispered Zed, as he got to his knees. The miner instantly followed his example.

Zed raised his right hand. He and Durkee sprang together from the roof, like twin cougars, down upon the men below them. It was a sheer drop of twelve feet. Each man fell upon his mark!

Zed's victim was the larger of the two. As Zed fell, his long arms closed around the fellow's neck. They went down with a thud! Struggled! Kicked! A gun roared! Zed was on his feet. His fist shot out. One hundred and eighty pounds of bone and muscle were behind that blow. The taller of the kidnapers took it on the chin. Spun crazily. Zed pounced upon him. Had him on the ground.

With a stout cord that Zed always carried in his pocket for emergencies, he bound the man's hands behind his back. The man's black mask was still in place.

Durkee had not fared so well. He was wrestling there in the dust, his man partly under him. Vainly the fellow was trying to draw a Colt.

Zed went to the miner's assistance. In the scuffle the man's mask was torn from his face.

"Jim Cornwall!" panted Zed. "The storekeeper! So you're one of the kidnapers!"

The storekeeper was speechless with rage when he saw who his assailants were, but his anger availed him nothing. A moment and his hands were tied behind his back.

"Draw your gun, George, an' fire five times into the air," directed Zed, while he finished tying Cornwall.

Durkee drew and fired as he had been told to do.

A moment and men began pouring out of the hotel and other buildings, half-dressed, sleepy-eyed men with guns in their hands. They saw the two bound men lying there in the street, the mask still covering the face of one of them.

Hadden stood near by and seemed entirely dazed over what had happened.

"Hadden!" gasped Zed. "Remember you're still my deputy! Your job for the next few minutes is to help guard these prisoners! I'm going——"

"My daughter!" interrupted the rancher. "You've spoiled everything, Zed! Spoiled everything!"

"We'll see," said Zed, as men came crowding around him.

The deputy reached down and snatched the black cloth from the face of the man who lay there at his feet. The fellow was unconscious, no doubt from the blow he'd taken on the chin. A large man, with an ugly face and a two-week stubble of black beard.

"Frank Cornwall, the broker!" a man in the crowd shouted. "Frank

Cornwall! It's him! He was dead an' buried! We buried him more 'an a week ago!"

"He's a long ways from bein' dead!" Zed chuckled.

"The deputy's robbed a grave!" continued the man. "He's got a corpse!"

The crowd fell back in awe and wonderment.

"Steady!" Zed roared. "This bird's not dead! He's very much alive! Every man within hearing takes my orders! A dozen of you get axes an' follow me! You! An' you! An' you! You're deputized! Get axes an' follow me"

Zed ran for Frank Cornwall's office, Durkee and many others at his heels. The deputy's head had never worked better than it was working now. They ran around to the rear door of the little building, tried the door, but it was locked. An ax was thrust into Zed's hand.

The deputy fell to work and in a moment he was joined by others. The sun was now over the horizon; morning had come. The sharp blades of a dozen axes crashed and splintered the rear wall of Frank Cornwall's office.

"It's built like a fort!" panted a man. "Never knew there was anything like this anywhere!"

"Hurry! Hurry!" shouted Zed. "Only a natural-born crook would build a place like this. I felt that when I first set eyes upon it!"

Even the heavy planking could not stand those blows for long. Five minutes and there was an opening large enough to admit a man. Zed wriggled his way through, the others following close behind him. A trapdoor stood open in the floor. Evidently there was a room dug in the earth beneath.

Zed pushed the others away.

"I'll go down alone!" he said. "Durkee, see that no one follows me!"

Zed could see that there was a light burning in the room below. He ran down a short flight of stairs. On a cot lay the figure of a young woman. She was bound hand and foot, and there was a gag in her mouth. Nothing was visible of her face except her eyes and forehead.

Quickly the deputy stepped across the room, cut the cords that bound her and removed the gag. Muriel Hadden lay there before him!

"Zed! Zed!" she moaned. "You've come!"

He helped her to sit up. She was weak and tired but otherwise appeared unharmed.

"George is dead?" she said. "Lynched! They told me he was! They told me you were!"

Zed stepped to the stairway and motioned for Durkee to come down.

Then came a happy cry from the girl and incoherent words from the young miner.

Zed stood there for a moment looking up at the ceiling. Then he went upstairs and dispersed the crowd and put the Cornwall brothers in the Cooperville lockup with orders that they were to be held incommunicado. Forthwith there began the busiest twenty-four hours of criminal investigation that he had ever embarked upon.

CHAPTER XI.

SIX-GUN JUSTICE.

IT was nine o'clock in the morning of the next day, and Jack Beagle's barroom was crowded to overflowing. At the end of the bar nearest the bat-wing doors stood Jim and Frank Cornwall. Fifteen feet down the bar and toward the rear of the room stood Zed, facing them. Ten or twelve feet from the

bar was a solid row of men, nine tenths of the adult male population of Cooperville being among their number. The prisoners were no longer bound or even handcuffed; their arms hung limply by their sides.

For hours Zed had debated with himself as to what he should do. Much of the evidence against the Cornwall brothers was circumstantial. Beyond a doubt he could get a court conviction when it was all assembled and presented to a jury, but it might be that there was a better and more expeditious way to handle the matter. One more to his liking. There was Osgood to be avenged. And only a six-gun could square the sheriff's death. A confession, for instance, might be managed.

"Gents!" began Zed, speaking to the roomful. "We're gathered here for a preliminary public hearin' in the matter of the people versus Jim an' Frank Cornwall. First thing, I'll ask all of you to disarm yourselves an' to stack your hardware on the gamblin' tables. Step lively, now! Be quick about it! I want no bursts of gunfire to puncture the dignity of these proceedin's."

There was considerable grumbling, but the request was speedily complied with. Even Hadden and Durkee did as they were told. When quiet returned, Zed continued, speaking now to the two prisoners:

"Frank an' Jim Cornwall," he said, "I can find but one good thing to say about you. Muriel Hadden tells me that you were kind to her while you had her in captivity. In return for this, I'm doin' you a favor." He turned to Hadden. "Hadden, get the guns that belong to the Cornwall brothers an' return them to their owners' holsters."

"Damned if I will!" exclaimed Hadden. "Not with us all unarmed!"

But Zed had his way. He reminded Hadden that *he*, himself, still had his six-guns.

Jim and Frank Cornwall brightened noticeably when the arrangement had been completed, as well they might. Immediately to their backs was the open door and beyond that a hitch rail well crowded with saddled horses. Zed had planned all that; it was very much to his liking. A sneer of confidence had settled on Frank Cornwall's unshaved face, but Jim Cornwall, the storekeeper, did not seem quite so sure of himself.

"Frank," began Zed, "we have a lot to talk over, you an' me. In the first place your right name is *not* Frank Cornwall! Ten years ago they called you Wimpy Tolliver. That was up in Pendleton. Remember? There was you, an' your brother, Jim——"

"Ah!" grunted Frank Cornwall. "I place you now! I been tryin' to figure it out! You were the kid deputy I ran away from!"

Frank Cornwall's chest was swelling with pride, as Zed had hoped it would. A moment more and the outlaw might be in a boastful mood.

"Yes," continued Zed, "you got away from me. The first an' last man to ever get away. But now, the shoe's on the other foot. I've caught you——"

"Yeah!" interrupted Frank Cornwall. "But I'm not so sure it's time for you to cackle, seein' that you were fool enough to give me an' Jim a gun apiece."

A faint smile flashed across the deputy's mouth.

"Nine or ten years have passed since those days in Pendleton," he continued. "You an' your brother Jim drifted down into Cooperville

some twelve months ago. You had money. Jim bought a general store, an' you, yourself, began to speculate in minin' prospects. Mebbe you even had a notion of goin' straight, but the notion didn't last."

Zed reached into his shirt and drew out a long-bladed knife. "Here's somethin' that once belonged to you, Frank. You tossed it at me one night an' missed. Real careless of you, Cornwall, but then there're five more just like it in the room you've built beneath your office. I found them there to-day. An', likewise, I found the corpse of your gunman, Grat Lofthouse. You were through with him, so you killed him!"

"Uh-huh!" admitted Frank Cornwall, almost boastfully. "It was dark that night behind the sheriff's shack. A fella can't always hit the mark. I'm ashamed I missed you. But I didn't miss Sheriff Osgood as he lay sleepin' in his bed."

A low murmur of surprise and mumbled oaths ran through the men in the barroom.

"Gettin' back to business," continued Zed, "a year ago you bought the Lucky Nellie Mine, salted it with a shotgun, an' leased it to a chap named George Durkee. Directly across the ridge from Durkee was the Little Dollar, worked by one Adolph Drafus. Drafus made a strike, a real strike! George also made a strike. He, too, found the mother lode that centuries ago enriched the Chinese Wash placers."

"Good heavens, Summers!" interrupted Frank Cornwall. "You're gettin' to be a regular mind reader!"

"An' then one evening," continued Zed, "just as the sun was settin', you shot Drafus in the back at a spot not far from Durkee's cabin. You're a clever man, Frank Cornwall! Just why did you do that?"

"That's easy!" said Frank Cornwall. "You think that I'm afraid to talk, do you? Well—men'll tell about all this in days to come an' ride well around Frank Cornwall when they chance to meet him on the trail. I was gettin' two birds with one stone. Drafus an' Durkee were both in my way to riches, an' the men don't live who can stand in Frank Cornwall's way. Clever, wasn't it, the way I fixed it up for Durkee to be hung by Talbot Hadden?

"My first thought was to have Durkee blamed for Drafus's death. But Frank Cornwall has a long head. Wouldn't it be a better idea for *me* to die, too? Then even if they should discover who really shot Adolph Drafus, what difference would it make? Frank Cornwall would be dead! There was a twin brother of mine comin' down from Montana. I, myself, was to be that brother! I was to own both mines! I have no twin brother! But I was to effect a limp with one foot when people were watchin', which would be real easy. That an' a growth of whiskers.

"It was Grat Lofthouse who palmed the bills with the blood on them an' pretended to take them from Durkee's pocket. Grat knew too much. That's why we finished him."

"Sure! Sure!" said Zed. "Very clever! There was also the Mexican named Pedro who came to Talbot Hadden with a cock-an'-bull story a mile long, about Muriel Hadden, that sent the girl's father into Cooperville with murder in his heart.

"You took a pine box out to the mine, killed your own dog to provide blood for your clothing and the two twenty-dollar bills Jim gave the sheriff. Then you had yourself

'buried' in the cemetery. But it was only your dog you had buried, together with your pants an' boots. Yesterday I dug up your coffin! I know! But you were careless with the red hair of that hound. Very careless! I found some of it up at the mine. Some more of it on the bills your brother an' Grat Lofthouse gave Sheriff Osgood.

"Your brother promptly started talkin' about a twin brother of yours, a mythical fella named Gus, from Montana, who would be along in thirty days. You, yourself, intended to impersonate this man. That was the way you planned to come back to Cooperville, an' then you intended to live here in peace an' security an' to get rich on that mother lode up in Fish Ridge.

"Drafus an' Durkee an' Frank Cornwall would all be dead, an' Gus Cornwall would own their property! The only trouble was, mister, that Sheriff Osgood sent for me—an' your dog had red hairs! An' I happen to remember your family up at Pendleton. There were but two of you in those days. The moment I set eyes on Jim Cornwall, the storekeeper, I realized that I had found the brother of the man I'd been lookin' for all these years. Ten years ago you were wanted for a cold-blooded murder——"

"Talbot Hadden's a weak-livered hombre," interrupted Frank Cornwall. "If he'd done his stuff, lynched the miner, it wouldn't have mattered whether you'd come or not. It was me who sent the Mexican to tell Talbot about his daughter an' the miner. What of it! I'm not ashamed of anything I did! Sheriff Osgood suspected too much. I had to kill him. If he was footloose an' free——"

Suddenly Jim Cornwall had turned to his brother and was hoarsely whispering to him. Zed strained his ears and could catch the indistinct words: "We'll make a break! Just as soon as I give the word! We'll move together. There's horses outside!"

"Things didn't work out so well for you," spoke up Zed. "Things suddenly got complicated. Durkee was free. I turned him loose with a feelin' it would bother somebody. I wanted to know who that somebody was. That massive brain of yours reasoned that Muriel Hadden knew where Durkee was. You kidnaped her. But the girl was too smart for you. She led you on the wildest goose chase that ever a bright man followed. Before that you tried to kill me an' Hadden at the mine, but luck was with us, an' we fooled you. Then you left the note on the trail. Durkee found it an' gave it to me an' Hadden."

"Correct," said Frank Cornwall. "You're right! Me an' Jim an' Grat Lofthouse did it. But Grat's dead. He'll never talk now. Men'll tell about what me an' Jim have done—will tell about it for years on end."

"I understand," continued Zed. "I understand. That mother lode Drafus an' George Durkee had found was slippin' through your fingers. Then that same massive brain of yours got the idea that Muriel Hadden was worth forty thousand dollars to her father, which she was. The only difficulty was, Frank, you made kind of a mess of things tryin' to collect it. Yes, sir, you an' Jim have sure made an awful mess."

As Zed finished speaking, some one in the rear of the room suggested that the prisoners should be hanged without delay.

Zed could see Frank Cornwall stiffen and then he knew that the show-down was but a moment away. Escape was there behind them if

they had the nerve to make a try for it.

Frank and Jim Cornwall had slowly shifted their positions during the talk. They now stood side by side facing Zed, their backs to the open door. The deputy still leaned rather carelessly against the bar.

"You've growed a lot, Zed," purred Frank Cornwall, "since them days in Pendleton. I remember you real well. A kid deputy with the down still on his chin. I fooled you! Outsmarted you altogether!"

Zed's eyes had never been more alert. He could see Frank Cornwall glancing sidewise at his brother. They understood each other, those two men; had agreed that the time for action had come. The deputy waited until he was doubly sure that they were really starting the draw.

As they began to move, Zed sprang away from the bar. A light, quick movement! Four guns roared! All in the space of a split second. Four guns! And the first two that spoke were Zed Summers's! The hail of lead passed harmlessly over the deputy as he dropped to his knees. Dropped all the way to the floor!

There was no need for Zed to fire again. Two guilty men lay outstretched there before the bat-wing doors!

LATE afternoon and Zed and Hadden were riding toward the Box C. Ahead of them and very close together rode Durkee and the girl.

"Summers," said the rancher, "I want to make you a present. I owe you something. I'm givin' you half my ranch an' half the stock——"

But Zed shook his head. "I've got my own ranch, Talbot. I'm content. I'm ridin' home to-morrow. But if I were you, I'd engage a minister to do a little job for Muriel an' that miner. A job that only a parson can do."

"Good!" said Talbot Hadden. "I'm glad you spoke of it. I'll attend to that the first thing in the mornin'. Pretty Boy Bailey is out of the picture forever. This miner has nerve. Durkee proved that plenty when he jumped down off the roof of the blacksmith shop with you. I'll be right proud to have him for my son-in-law."

The rancher meant what he said. Muriel Hadden and George Durkee were joined in wedlock two days later.

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LUCK AND A FRYING PAN

By HUGH F. GRINSTEAD

Author of "Idaho's Glorious Fourth," etc.

WHY, I don't know what 'tis to be skeered of anything, since the time I took that desp'rate outlaw single-handed, over on Wild Hoss Canyon," boasted "Idaho" Freeman as he carefully oiled and cleaned his ancient six-shooter.

"Desp'rate outlaw, your granny," snorted his old partner, Mack Barnes. "That feller was just a greenhorn at outlawin'."

"Just the same, he robbed the stage and was breakin' open the money box, when I slipped up behind him and cracked him over the head with a club," Idaho proudly reminded.

"He must 'a' been sick or somethin' to let a danged old mud turtle like you sneak up behind him unbeknownst," said Mack.

"Gotch-eared Pete is a reg'lar he-outlaw, and he wasn't even feelin' bad till I knocked him cold with a club," Idaho declared. "You can't deny I took him all by myself."

"I ain't sayin' you didn't git him, but it was a accident; and just like lightnin', accidents don't strike twice in the same place," Mack replied.

"What you mean it was a accident?" Idaho demanded.

"You was lookin' for a hoss thief, and wasn't even lookin' for a stage robber when you run onto that feller," Mack answered.

"Y-yes, I was after him for stealin' my hoss," Idaho agreed. "But it didn't make a bit of diff'rence to me when he turned into a stage robber so suddent. A thing like that wouldn't happen twice in a lifetime."

"That's what I been tryin' to tell you," Mack put in. "It was just plain luck that you got that feller, and luck ain't ever with you twice in a row. Now this Bill Jackman, he'll——"

"I tell you these bad men is all alike, just a lot of bluff," Idaho interrupted. "Bill Jackman ain't no worse'n Notch-eared Pete, and I'll prob'ly bring him in the same way, if I'm lucky enough to git sight of him."

"Well, go ahead and git yourself shot full o' nail holes, you danged old jackass," Mack roared. "You've had the swell head ever since that West Bend stage robber let you ketch him, and seems like you lost what little sense you had, talkin' about goin' out and ketchin' Bill Jackman like he was a rabbit."

"You can't skeer me hollerin', and I aim to ketch Bill Jackman and lead him home with a halter rope," said Idaho.

"All right, go ahead," Mack growled. "But before you go, I want you to tell me whether you want your remainders planted up there on the ridge by that big rock or in the reg'lar graveyard at Badger Valley."

"Seems like you can pick the unpleasantest things to talk about," Idaho complained. "Now me, I aim to always talk cheerful, then I'll feel cheerful."

"Yeah, I knowed a feller once that joked and laughed just a minute before he was goin' to be shot," said Mack.

IDAHO sniffed contemptuously, but said nothing. He knew Mack, once well started, would keep up his gloomy remarks for an hour, and when a fellow is about to embark upon a hunt for dangerous criminals, he needs something cheerful.

Bill Jackman was, indeed, a desperate outlaw. Only three days before, he had killed and robbed the messenger carrying the pay roll to the Ore Creek mines. A few hours later, his horse was shot from under him by officers in pursuit, and the hunted man had taken refuge among the brush and rocks on the slope near the head of Dry Canyon.

The spot where he disappeared was quickly surrounded, and though the searchers continued to beat the brush for the remainder of the day, they failed to find Bill Jackman. The only solution to the mystery surrounding his disappearance was that he had taken refuge in one of the deserted mines or prospect tunnels along the slope.

Some even claimed the outlaw's footprint had been found at the entrance to the old Lone Cedar Mine, and a relay of men were keeping watch, waiting for the killer to come out, as he must eventually do. Already without food for two days, he would soon make a desperate effort to escape.

If Idaho had definite plans for snaring the wily desperado, he had so far kept this to himself, and in spite of Mack's attempts to worm the secret from him. And now the time had come for the man hunt. His guns cleaned and loaded, Idaho dropped his old six-shooter in its holster and shouldered his rifle.

"I'll be back some time between now and to-morrow mornin'," he announced, reaching for his hat.

"Wouldn't surprise me you got

home before bedtime," Mack responded.

"Why, Mack, you just now said I—er—that Bill Jackman would—would——"

"I changed my mind. He won't shoot you full o' nail holes, because you won't even meet up with him up there amongst them old mines where you're goin'."

"I'll be the only one that does meet up with him, because I ain't goin' to look where them other fellers are," Idaho replied. "Ain't many that knows the old Lone Cedar Mine has got another openin' amongst the rocks at the head of Dry Canyon, and right there is where Bill Jackman will come out along to'ards night."

"Don't tell me this here desp'rate outlaw has sent you word where and when to meet him, so's you could crack him over the head with a club," Mack replied sarcastically.

"I ain't had no word from anybody. I figgered it out by myself," said Idaho. "I been without grub a few days in my time, and I know a feller will take big chances to git some about the third day. Them other fellers has all quit huntin' over that way and settled down to wait tother side of the ridge."

Now that Mack knew his partner's plan, he was more uneasy than ever. It was a logical plan, if a man really wanted to meet a dangerous criminal face to face. There at the head of the canyon, where nobody would be on watch, was where the imprisoned man would seek to make his escape under cover of darkness, now that the coast was clear on that side.

And Idaho, who had been absurdly enthusiastic over his success in taking a lesser criminal almost by accident, proposed to wait there alone with the hope of capturing a criminal who placed no value upon a human life.

"I reckon you aim to b'il coffee and fry bacon out there in the canyon, figgerin' Bill Jackman will get a whiff of it and come out, ready to give up his guns for a slice of bacon or sell his freedom for a cup of hot coffee," Mack said, ridiculing.

"No, I won't do that. I'll be hid behind a big rock on the far rim of the canyon, my gun p'inted straight at where he'd come out, my finger on the trigger," Idaho explained.

"Aim to kill him first then ask him to give hisself up?"

"Mack, you know I wouldn't kill a man," Idaho exclaimed. "I'll just shoot all around him till he's good and skeered, then I'll holler to him to drop his guns and h'ist his hands."

"Better shoot straight at him if you want to miss him about four feet," Mack advised.

"I ain't needin' no advice from a danged old pess'mist like you," Idaho retorted. "I never would git nowheres if I listened to you."

"You'd stay alive and all in one piece," Mack replied.

"I ain't agoin' to listen to your discouragin' re-marks another minute," Idaho cried, starting off.

"I hope it ain't hard diggin' up there by the big rock," Mack called after his departing friend, but there was no smile on his face as he stood watching him till he disappeared at a turn of the trail.

It may have been that Mack knew Idaho well enough to conclude that he would lose courage and retreat when real danger threatened. At any rate, he made no further attempts to dissuade him.

"Danged old sorehead, he's jealous, that's what he is," Idaho muttered to himself. "He don't want

to see me do a thing he wouldn't do, 'specially somethin' brave."

STILL muttering to himself, Idaho trudged on. For all his short stature, he was a good walker, and only a person afoot could take the short cut to the head of Dry Canyon among the hills. It wasn't far from sundown when he arrived at the place where he could look across at the overgrown opening to the old mine.

There had been no need for haste, for Idaho had a tedious hour of waiting before him. An hour is a long time to wait, just wait and think. Idaho's thoughts were not particularly cheerful, for he could not banish from his mind recollections of Mack's direful forebodings.

"He was just tryin' to skeer me," Idaho muttered, seeking to reassure himself in a dark moment.

The sun had disappeared behind the chain of foothills, and Idaho was getting stiff and tired from lying so long in one position. He shivered a little as the gloom of early twilight deepened in the canyon, though it was not cold.

"I—I reckon maybe I was mistook," he told himself. "Like as not that feller ain't never found out about this here openin' to the old mine, or maybe he's done give hisself up to them fellers waitin' at the main tunnel. Just my luck," he added without sign of regret.

After that, Idaho's spirits seemed to sink with the sun. A fellow might boast of his prowess in the bright light of day, but it was quite another thing to be confronted by the real danger in the gloom of approaching night.

"Ain't no use for me to wait here all night," Idaho presently mumbled to himself. "Why, that outlaw may be a hundred miles from here by this time; maybe he never went into that old mine a-tall. It stands to reason that if he was comin' out tonight, he'd be about it now. If he's in there, he might have some grub in there with him. I'm beginning to feel foolish settin' here."

Strange as it might seem, Idaho was feeling better at the contemplation of a fruitless quest. He wasn't at all disappointed at the prospect of leaving without a sight of the desperado. He sat up and rubbed stiffened limbs.

"I reckon Mack will laugh at me for not bringin' him back, but a feller has got to find anything before he ketches it, and it's gittin' too dark to see a feller if——"

Idaho broke off with a breathless gasp, for at that instant he glimpsed a moving object. It was outlined against the dark blur that marked the jagged opening to the old mine. Idaho blinked and looked again. It was a man, beyond any doubt, and he was moving stealthily!

Idaho dropped down behind his big rock, and as he did so, a trembling finger involuntarily pressed the trigger. A red flash cut the semidarkness, and the report of the gun reverberated back and forth between the canyon walls.

For the next few minutes, Idaho lay where he was, his heart thumping wildly, his teeth chattering, in spite of his effort to regain his waning courage. Twice he tried to raise his head and look over the rock, but each time he was confronted with the realization that he would have to expose most of his head before he could see anything.

Finally he mustered sufficient courage to peep over, but there was nobody to be seen up or down the canyon. There were dark shadows, however, where a man might hide.

"Must've skeered him back in his hole," Idaho reflected. "I ought to've known he'd do that, but a feller can't always have things his way. He won't try to come out here ag'in to-night, and in the mornin' I'll roll some big rocks in that hole so he'll have to come out the main tunnel."

IDAHO lay quite still for a little while. A night owl fluttered out of its cave, and bats swarmed up from dark recesses.

"I don't re'lly need that thousand dollars re-ward," Idaho told himself in a breathless whisper. "I feel kinda mean tryin' to git it away from them fellers that's been watchin' the main tunnel all this time. Maybe some of 'em has got fam'lies to support."

He drew a deep breath of relief, now that he had definitely decided to abandon the field to those valiant men guarding the main entrance. He had worked up a good excuse for going home.

"I'll fire another shot into that hole just to make him believe somebody is watchin' here," he concluded. "Be a good joke if that wasn't him a-tall, but just some feller huntin' for him. I reckon he's runnin' yet, whoever he is."

Idaho fired again. There was a spurt of flame, and the report of the gun went roaring down the canyon.

Then Idaho chuckled for the first time in hours, picturing a man running to escape from his harmless shots.

But the chuckle ended in a squawk of dismay and terror, as somebody sprang from the darkness behind, landed on Idaho's back, strong arms encircling him. The rifle went clattering to the ground, and the six-shooter was lifted from its holster by the assailant.

"Shootin' at me, was you?" demanded the stranger as he ran his hands into the pockets of his captive and searched for other weapons.

"N-no, I was just shootin' at—at a——"

"What about this deputy's star you got pinned to your vest?"

"I—I ain't no deppity sheriff, I swear I ain't," Idaho declared. "I found that star and pinned it on my vest just to be a-doin' it," he lied, not quite sure what he ought to say.

He recalled now that Mack had warned him not to keep on wearing a deputy sheriff's badge after his term of office had expired, for he had really been appointed a deputy once. It was beginning to look as if the presence of the nickel-plated star might prove embarrassing.

"Sounds like a lie to me, but I don't blame you fellers for wantin' that thousand dollars," growled the stranger.

Among the things taken from Idaho's pocket was a pair of handcuffs that he had bought when he became a deputy sheriff some years before. They had never been used.

"What you say you was shootin' at?" demanded the man, who held Idaho firmly by the arms.

"I was shootin' at—at a coyote," Idaho answered.

"I been called worse things, but just for that I'll lock your hands together with your own handcuffs while I'm makin' up my mind what to do with you," said the man who Idaho felt sure was Bill Jackman himself.

Idaho submitted without protest as the handcuffs were slipped on his wrists and locked. He didn't mind that so much, but he was wondering what was to be done with him later. He couldn't expect much mercy from the man he had evidently shot

at a little while before. It was hard to understand how this fellow had slipped up out of the canyon to make a rear attack, but here he was.

"Guess I'd pass for a sheriff all right," said the man, pinning Idaho's badge of office to his own vest. "You'll be the prisoner this time. Folks that don't know us will take you for Bill Jackman sooner than they will me."

"I—I reckon so," Idaho stammered.

"Don't talk unless I tell you. Take me to your hoss."

"I'm afoot."

"Well, take me to where there's some grub and a hoss, and be quick as you can. I'm starvin'."

"It's five miles to the nearest house," Idaho explained.

"Well, start movin'," ordered the outlaw. "I'd've shot you before now and throwed you in the canyon, if I hadn't had a use for you. When a feller has been cooped in a dark mine two, three days, he ain't li'ble to be in a good humor, 'specially if he ain't had no grub. Now hurry, and don't talk."

IDAHO did hurry, and he discovered that he could get along very well without talking. Bill Jackman would be bad enough any time, but when he had been without food for two days, he was undoubtedly a terror.

The outlaw seemed in a great hurry, and made fast time for a man who has been weakened by hunger. As he went, urging Idaho to faster speed, he looked back now and then.

"Them two shots of yourn give me a idee of right where you was, and I was needin' some more ammunition, but I'm afeard I wasn't the only one heard 'em," he growled.

There was a chance that the shots had been heard by the men at the main entrance to the abandoned mine, just over the ridge, but if they came to investigate, they would find nothing.

For two hours the two men went on, Idaho urged to his fastest speed by dire threats from his companion. They were within a mile of the cabin, which Idaho had failed to say was his own cabin. Now he was afraid to say anything.

"Don't know what sort of a place this is you're takin' me to, but I'll fix you so you can't yap and spoil things," said the killer as he fashioned a gag from an old bandanna and tied it across Idaho's mouth. "Try any funny business, and you'll find out that Bill Jackman settles accounts right on the spot."

Idaho shuddered at mention of the name as well as at the threat. Cold sweat broke out over him when he suddenly realized that Mack might not understand the situation, and make trouble. He almost wished he had told that this was his own cabin they were going to, but he had been ordered to keep still.

When they topped the last ridge and saw a light shining from the cabin window, Bill Jackman proceeded more cautiously. He circled the cabin completely, keeping Idaho close to him, before he walked up and knocked at the door.

"If there's any shootin', I'll hold you in front of me so all the bullets will go through you first," hissed Jackman.

At the insistent knocking, Mack opened the door and peered into the darkness at his visitors. He blinked and stared when he saw the gleaming star pinned to the stranger's vest, and Idaho wearing the handcuffs. He betrayed neither fear nor concern at the queer situation.

"Come right in, sheriff," he invited. "I reckon you want to bring your prisoner in, too. He's a mean-lookin' cuss."

Pushing Idaho in before him, the criminal masquerading as a sheriff entered. His hand hovered near the butt of the gun at his waist as he turned warily and sat down with his back to the wall, his eyes on the door.

"I want somethin' to eat, soon's you can git it," he announced hoarsely.

"You come at the right time, sheriff," Mack replied. "I got a big pan o' beans cooked, and the coffee ain't cold yet. I'll have flapjacks and bacon in three shakes. I always like to do what I can for a officer doin' his duty."

THE hungry desperado made no response, but his lips trembled with eagerness when Mack poured a cup of hot coffee, and set out a dish of beans. The outlaw gulped down the coffee and bolted some of the beans while waiting for the more appetizing bacon and flapjacks. As he ate, Mack sought to draw him into conversation.

"Is this feller you got here a hoss thief, or is he maybe this here Bill Jackman that some of 'em claim they got trapped in a old mine somewheres?" Mack naïvely inquired.

"You guessed it," grudgingly replied the stranger, leaving Mack to decide whether Idaho should be regarded as a hoss thief or a killer.

"He's a mean-lookin' devil," Mack ventured after a moment. "Must be one of them loud-mouthed cussin' fellers, the way you got him gagged up."

The man so busy with his food merely nodded this time.

"I ain't got no use for one of them big-talkin' fellers that's always braggin' about hisself," said Mack. "I had a old pardner once that——"

"I want a hoss, the best you got, soon's I git through eatin'," the outlaw cut in with a scowl.

"Don't you want a extry one for your prisoner?" Mack asked.

"One critter is enough for both of us. I like to keep this feller pretty close to me," was the reply.

"Don't know as I blame you. I wouldn't trust a mean-lookin' hombre like him more'n six inches," Mack declared. "I hope he don't git away from you anywheres around here."

Idaho glared angrily at his old partner, who responded with a grimace.

It wasn't like Mack to ask a lot of questions of a total stranger. He wouldn't have wasted a word in useless conversation had he not had an object in view. He thought he understood the reason for the two riding one horse, and he guessed that Idaho would last just as long as he was useful to his captor, if the arrangement were carried out.

A small flapjack and three slices of bacon were in the heavy, long-handled frying pan setting on top of the little sheet-iron stove. They were about half done, and Mack stood over the stove, a fork in his hand.

"Seems like you're wastin' a lot o' time. Hurry up and git me some more grub," snarled the none-too-welcome guest, seeming to forget for a moment that he was supposed to be an officer and not a ruffian.

Mack was tall, and his arms were long. He could sit at the table and reach a pot or a pan on the stove in the corner without difficulty. Now, at the urgent demand of the rude visitor for more food, he straight-

ened up and grasped the handle of the big frying pan.

"Here you are," he cried.

A single motion would have sufficed to set the pan and its contents on the table before the hungry man, a practice common in camps and meagerly furnished cabins. But Mack chose to lift the pan by the long handle, and bring it over in a semicircle. The pan was made to perform a sudden gyration in the air, turning over in the process.

To a man expert in the use of this popular cooking utensil, this was no trick at all. The contents didn't fall out because the pan was descending faster than the flapjack and bacon could have fallen. Mack could have righted the pan and set it on the table without spilling anything, but instead, he brought it down with all the force he could muster on the head of the outlaw just as he was beginning to suspect that all was not well.

THE man would doubtless have let out a yell of pain and rage, had he not been stunned by the blow, for hot grease and half-cooked dough dripped down over his face. A strong arm and a thick iron frying pan had conquered the enemy.

As he sagged in his chair, Mack secured his weapons and tied him with his own belt before he regained his senses. In barely a minute from the time the scoundrel had made his peremptory demand for food, he lay bound and helpless on the floor.

This attended to, Mack turned to his old partner, whose eyes were twinkling with satisfaction.

"Now, you danged old hip'potamus, this is one time I got you where you can't talk back to me," Mack began, grinning. "Brave man, ain't you, comin' back wearin' your own handcuffs. I was lookin' for you, but I figgered you could outrun that cuss."

While Mack talked, he removed the gag from Idaho's mouth, but it was a minute before more than a sputtering gasp came.

"Key's in my pocket," Idaho mumbled, raising his manacled hands significantly.

Mack found the key and unlocked the handcuffs, and the first thing Idaho did when he was free was to snap these selfsame handcuffs on the wrists of the outlaw, who was just regaining consciousness.

"Now, you danged snake in the grass, you're my pris'ner from now on," Idaho cried.

"Your pris'ner," Mack scoffed. "If I ain't mistook, it was me put him in his place when you was hog tied and down."

"You wouldn't've ever got a crack at him if I hadn't brought him here," said Idaho.

"If I ain't deaf and dumb and blind, it was him brought you here," Mack replied.

"I reckon he looked at it that way, too, but I told him this was the nighest place to git grub and a hoss, and he made me show him the way," Idaho explained.

"Bein' talkative like you are, it's a wonder you didn't tell him you lived here, and that would've sp'iled everything."

"I reckon I would've, only he told me to shet up, and put this gag on me," Idaho confessed.

"Seems like he stacked his deck wrong, like most of them cusses do in time; and me and you drawed winnin' cyards from the bottom," Mack philosophized, after a pause.

"And played 'em in pairs," Idaho replied.

"And listened to luck at the right time," Mack added.

BLIND TRAIL

By LLOYD ERIC REEVE

Author of "Gold And Sand," etc.

LIFE is no more than a great maze of trails. Blind trails twisting into the unknown future, trails to happiness, and tragedy, and the inevitable trail of death.

The back trail of the palomino was not difficult to follow. Steve Canton, forking his blue roan and leading the riderless horse, continued along it for half an hour, and then, topping a broad swell, saw the slight figure seated in the grassy depression below, a slender girl in faded jeans, a mannish shirt, and wide-brimmed floppy sombrero.

At the sound of his approach, she glanced up quickly. She started to rise, sank swiftly back, and then beckoned with her hand. Steve returned the wave and rode on down the slope. Reining up, he swung to ground and took off his sombero.

"You hurt, miss?"

She looked up at him.

"My ankle, mister. It's only twisted, but I can't walk. A rattler spooked my pony. Then—well, the ground flew up and hit my face!"

He saw that she was young, lithe. Under the floppy sombrero, her hair was red-gold, copper-hued where the sun struck, her eyes a twinkling blue.

"Found your saddled horse back yonder," he explained; "figured maybe some one was in trouble."

"I was getting a little scared," the girl admitted. "I'm eight miles from home."

He smiled. "Figure you can stand the ride?"

"If I can get up on my horse. And I can do that if"—she laughed—"if you'll give me a boost."

"I'll do better than that," Steve

declared. He slipped one arm beneath her knees, the other around her waist, lifted and carried her to the palomino, set her astride the saddle.

She looked down, her blue eyes dancing.

"Strong man, aren't you?"

"Shucks," Steve said. "I bet you don't weigh ninety pounds."

Her eyes were suddenly earnest. "I'd like to do something to repay you."

"This isn't anything." Steve grinned. "But if you know a rancher around here that needs a rider, you might tell me. I—well, I been riding the grub line three months now."

Her gaze touched him, flicking over his range-clad body, the flat hips and broad shoulders, the lean face and gray eyes.

"A job?" she asked. "Why, yes. I think the Bar C could use a rider. They're starting a beef round-up this week and driving next. That's on my way home. I'll show you the place."

"Thanks." Steve swung to his saddle, and they rode off, stirrup to stirrup. He glanced sideways.

"Who owns the Bar C, miss?"

"Martin," the girl said. "Linda Martin."

"Linda?" Steve echoed. "That sounds like a woman."

The girl nodded. "Jim Martin's girl. Jim died last year, and Linda's been trying to run the ranch since. She has several riders, but men aren't so good at taking orders from a woman. Linda has her troubles."

"A friend of yours, I reckon?"

"Linda, you mean? Well, sometimes she is and sometimes she isn't. It depends on how I feel."

"My name," Steve told her, "is Canton. Steve Canton. I don't recollect that you told me yours."

The girl laughed. "I'm Linda Martin," she said.

BETWEEN the granite cliffs, against a vast profusion of naked peaks, the Bar C was in the center of a wide canyon—an ancient adobe house, numerous outbuildings, pole corrals, and branding chutes. An old spread, rooted in the first history of the land, powerful, secure, symbolical of a wilderness aristocracy. And it was possessed, every animal, every inch of land, every proud tradition, by Linda Martin, this slim and laughing girl. Steve Canton thought of this as they rode into the ranch yard. And also he thought of himself. He remembered suddenly, oddly, that he was a penniless drifter.

Helping Linda to dismount, he slipped an arm around her waist and half carried her to a chair on the dusky porch. As he did this, a lank man came up rapidly from the corrals. He had long arms, a sweeping iron-gray mustache, and staring, curiously colorless eyes. He glanced briefly at Steve, and then, ignoring him, spoke directly to Linda Martin.

"Why, what happened, miss? You get hurt?"

"Rattler," Linda said. "Horse jumped out from under me." She glanced at Steve. "This is Steve Canton, Dan. He helped me home. Dan is my foreman, Steve. Dan Davis."

Davis swung his head and looked at Steve. He said, "Howdy." His voice was just as flat, as colorless as his eyes.

"Steve's looking for a job," Linda stated.

Davis stared back at the girl.

"Don't reckon we need another

hand, miss. We got a full pay roll now."

Linda flushed; her voice sharpened slightly.

"I've already hired him, Dan."

Steve interrupted swiftly: "Now don't be figuring you owe me a job jus' because——"

The girl's eyes narrowed. In her steady gaze, Steve suddenly sensed an uncertain message, almost an appeal. Yet her voice was curt:

"Didn't you tell me you wanted a job? Well, I've offered you one."

Steve nodded slowly, puzzled. "Why—thanks, miss. I'm obliged to you an' glad to take it."

Davis smiled, and again Steve felt the queer coldness of the man.

"Miss Linda's the boss," he said. "If she says you're hired, why, you're hired. You'll find a bed down in the bunk house."

Steve met the rest of the hands at supper, five hard-faced riders. They all appeared to accept him with a casual friendliness, yet he felt the same queer restraint in their manner which had marked Davis's greeting —a friendliness which was a little too forced, and behind that a slow and not at all cordial estimating.

Linda ate with the crew. As she chatted briskly, the men all answered with a swift, almost sly eagerness. It seemed to Steve that they were constantly trying to impress her with their loyalty, but at the same time, despite this, he sensed that Linda Martin was somehow alone, starkly alone among six men whose voices and faces said one thing, whose thoughts were something else.

Two days later the outfit set out on the beef round-up. Each morning Davis led the crew to some high point, and there scattered them to comb the surrounding ridges and draws. Only one circle a day was made; during the long afternoons the prime steers were cut out, the remainder of the cattle turned back to range, and the growing herd of beeves shoved on to the next camp.

By the end of the fifth day Steve noticed that he was never for a moment left alone, that the lank foreman so designed his orders that one or another of Linda's men was always with him. Their casual friendliness continued, yet a sudden silence often met his unexpected appearance, and behind his back, always, eyes were watching him with a cold, calculating wonder.

During these days of the round-up—the hot mornings of crashing through the dense brush, the dusty afternoons in the swirling bedlam of the cutting ground, the cool nights of circling the bedded herd—his thoughts returned inevitably to Linda Martin.

Strange imaginings these, after his years of aimless drifting. Women had meant little in his life. Now, for the first time, he found that a girl could hold and trouble his thoughts. He didn't like it. He told himself that Linda Martin was the owner of an enormous ranch, that he was himself a drifting saddle tramp. Linda Martin was not for him.

ON the eighth day the beef herd was grazed back to the home ranch. After supper Steve became restless and walked out into the moonlit night. The hot air, vibrant with the shrill fiddling of countless crickets, was breathless and sultry, drenched with the heady scent of pine and sage. Crossing the ranch yard, he sat on a large stone a hundred yards south of the old adobe, rolled a cigarette, and smoked moodily.

Presently he heard a light step and, turning, saw Linda Martin. She smiled uncertainly and sat on the rock beside him. For the first time he saw her dressed in other than man's clothing. She wore a filmy white sleeveless dress. The difference was strangely breath taking; Steve felt suddenly startled, a little awed and speechless. She laughed softly.

"Well, mister. How's it going?"

He said, "Why, you're pretty as a picture!"

Her laugh tinkled. "So *that's* how it's going!"

"Beg your pardon, Miss Linda," he muttered. "That sort of popped out before I ever knew I wanted to say it."

"Well, mister," she said, "I like it. I dress up like a man and pretend to run a ranch. And all the time, inside, I'm listening. I'm listening for some one to tell me I have pretty eyes and how would I like to take a walk in the moonlight. And, mister, 'way out here, a hundred miles from nowhere, you can listen a long time before you ever hear that!"

He glanced quickly away.

"That's a prime herd we brought in this afternoon, Miss Linda."

She raised her arms, clasping her hands behind her head, her pale face lifted to the night.

"Cattle!" she said. "What do I care about cattle? Look at the moon, Steve! Feel the night! Listen to the crickets!"

He stared at her oddly.

"You're a funny kid."

"I'm a woman."

Their eyes met. His hand went forward, touching her bare arm just above the elbow. He tensed a little. Never in his life had he felt anything so soft, so warmly alive, so satiny smooth. Suddenly his voice came huskily:

"Linda—Linda—I——"

She said, "Yes?" and leaned toward him.

He jerked suddenly to his feet, flung his cigarette savagely away.

"I'm a blamed fool!"

She stared up, her blue eyes wide, candid, even faintly desperate.

"Of course," she admitted. "But so am I. It happens that way sometimes. I guess I know now what they mean when they talk about a bolt from the blue."

"Miss Linda," he snapped, "I'm a drifting cowboy. I haven't a penny in the world. I don't amount to a thing. I'm hard an' rough an'—an' I'm jus' a saddle tramp, I tell you!"

"You're Steve Canton," she said.

His hands were clenched at his sides, his face gray.

"Miss Linda," he answered quietly, "I reckon I'll have to quit this job. I'm leaving in the morning."

Turning quickly, he walked back toward the bunk house. But he didn't go inside. Fifty feet away he paused, lost now in the shadows, and looked back. Then he saw her, wraithlike in her white dress, rising slowly, walking back to the house slowly. He heard the closing door. He thought of her alone in that enormous old adobe, uncertain, bewildered, probably hating him now. Presently he saw the glow of a lamp in her bedroom. He watched her cross the room and pull the shade. For a long time the window was a blank yellow eye. Then the light went out. He heard the shade go up and saw her for an instant, a pale shadow against the darkness behind, and then even the shadow vanished.

"Look at the moon, Steve! Feel the night! Listen to the crickets!"

FINALLY he turned back toward the bunk house. He moved numbly at first, only half aware of two voices muttering just ahead. But as he came abreast the building, a startling phrase penetrated his consciousness, and he pulled up sharply. Two men, around the corner of the bunk house, near the door, were conversing in low tones—Dan Davis, the lank foreman, and Pete Henley, a stocky, bow-legged rider. Their words came to Steve distinctly, Henley's nervous:

"Why, it's a murder charge!" he rasped. "That's going uncommon far, Dan. We could swing for it."

"You're a fool." Davis's tone was flat, impassive. "I've waited on Canton a week, figuring maybe he'd quit an' pull out. But he hasn't. So now we got to kill him."

"Why not jus' fire him?" Henley objected. "Wait until we're driving the beeves toward town to-morrow, an' then boot him out. Tell the girl he got drunk an' caused trouble."

"Sure," Davis growled, "an' have him snooping around maybe, watching us. I think he's falling for that girl."

"You want too much," Henley insisted. "There's only six of us. We can go through with this one job an' clear out with about five thousand to split between us. We needn't ever come back."

"You ever hear about killing the goose that lays a golden egg?" Davis asked. "Well, Linda Martin is that goose. If we play this right, we can get a fortune out of her in the next year. Five thousand? Huh! Why, this ranch is good for sixty thousand!"

Henley was silent an instant, then spoke slowly. "Well—how do you figure on getting rid of Canton?"

"On the drive," Davis stated. "Wait till one of us sees our chance, then a bullet in the backbone when he isn't looking. We'll tell the girl he got killed when the rustlers first jumped us."

Their voices faded, retreating into the bunk house. Steve squatted on his heels, stared thoughtfully into the moonlit night. Somehow, just as he had suspected, this outfit was planning to strip Linda Martin of her ranch. Just how they would work, he did not yet know. But he wanted to help Linda, felt that he must help her. His first impulse was to go to her, to tell her what he had heard, but on second thought he decided against that. After all, he had no proof.

The thing to do first was to get the proof. But how? He was himself slated to die if he went on the drive. But what if he didn't go? He had already told Linda he was quitting. What if he also told Davis, said that he was leaving the first thing in the morning? Then Davis might believe that he suspected nothing. Deciding his plan was worth a try, Steve came to his feet and sauntered into the bunk house.

Two of the men were already snoring in their bunks. Davis, Pete Henley, Jim Link, and Tom Arson were seated around a table, playing poker. Davis glanced up, his bland eyes expressionless.

"Hello, Steve. Want to take a hand?"

Steve shook his head; he crossed to his bunk and sat on the edge, staring glumly at the floor.

"Davis," he grumbled, "I feel like a dirty dog."

Davis laid down his cards.

"Huh?" he said.

"I don't cotton up to this drive to-morrow," Steve admitted. "If

you'll give me my time, I'd—well, I'd like to pull out first thing in the morning."

Davis's gaunt face was a little puzzled. He gazed coldly.

"Why, you haven't been here two weeks."

Steve nodded. "Tell you the truth, Davis, I'm on my way north to my brother's ranch up around Springer. When I braced Miss Linda for a job, I was broke an' hadn't eaten for three days. All I wanted was grub an' a few dollars stake."

Davis picked up his cards, looked at Jim Link, and said:

"Give me one."

Link dealt him one card. Davis picked it up, glanced at it, laid it face-down on the table, and grinned at Pete Henley.

"Pete," he observed, "sometimes when you least expect it, you draw an ace." His colorless gaze turned slowly to Steve. "That's all right, Canton," he agreed. "Maybe you've run a little blazer on us, but all of us make a play once in a while. Sure, I'll give you your time out of my own pocket, an' you can pull your freight first thing to-morrow."

EARLY the next morning, Steve left the Bar C. Riding back down the canyon, he followed a faint trail upward into the high crags of the northern rim country. Here, about twenty miles from the Bar C headquarters, he picketed his pony, climbed out to a high ledge, overlooking all the vast basin below, and settled himself to watch patiently.

About noon he sighted the slow-boiling dust cloud of the Bar C beef herd. The cattle trailed out of the deep canyon, flanked by Davis and his riders, and grazed slowly along the immense valley floor. To Steve, from his lofty vantage point, the mounted men looked no bigger than bobbing puppets and the cattle were as small as dogs. Occasionally, only a dim whisper of sound, he heard the far-away bellow of a steer.

The plan of the drive, he knew, was to cross the valley to-day, bedding down to-night at the foot of Lost Pass, to push through the pass to-morrow, and on the third day to cross the southern plain to Mecca. The hot hours dragged on; entirely as planned the drive continued, and in the late afternoon Steve saw the distant herd circled and held for the bed ground at the foot of Lost Pass.

He fixed a snack of food then, ate, and when violet twilight settled rode back down to the darkening valley. Night fell, like the sudden folding of black wings, as he came out on the basin floor—a vast and brooding night, lighted only by the pale brilliance of myriad flashing stars. Steve put his roan to a lope, slanted swiftly up the valley, and less than two hours later dismounted a mile above the bedded herd. He could hear the occasional fretful bellow of steers, as he staked and left his horse, walking ahead afoot, he presently caught the mournful voices of the night herders, singing as they circled the bedded beeves.

As he came closer, he noticed a mysterious activity. Pausing some distance from the herd, he squatted on his heels, watching. By now his eyes had become accustomed to the massive darkness, and he could distinguish the black silhouettes of men and animals. Presently he saw Davis and his men extinguish their camp fire, saddle, and mount. They rode out to the herd, and shortly the long ropes swished, voices rose in shrill yells, horns rattled and clicked, as they stirred the shadowy cattle,

stringing them out and starting them slowly north.

Steve came to his feet. Here at last was the mysterious play for which he had been patiently waiting. Davis was now moving Linda's cattle in a night drive. But instead of entering the pass that led to Messa, he had turned the cattle at right angles. He was driving them due north, up the long valley, close to those darkly looming mountains.

Returning quickly to his horse, Steve mounted. At about half a mile, he followed behind the mysterious drive. He stayed far enough back to remain unseen, but close enough that the resentful bawling of the beeves, the urging shouts of the men, were always in his ears.

The black hours slipped past. He had no way of telling what waited ahead. Death perhaps, one against six. Simply he followed a blind trail, even as the drifting cattle. He knew only that he wanted to help a slender girl, somehow to salvage her herd from that morass of plotting minds ahead. Forgetting himself, to save these animals, this symbol of Linda Martin's wealth, these earthly possessions which put her so inevitably beyond his reach, so inevitably beyond the leashed desire of his arms.

THE morning star, a silver taper, burned against the ebony sky. Ahead, the cattle were finally turned. They left the level valley and streamed up a narrow canyon. Steve followed behind. At the head of the canyon, the beeves were circled and held. Once more Steve staked and left his roan. He went on afoot, slanting up the side of the canyon until he was abreast and above the milling herd.

The first gray light of dawn crept across the land, and far to the east the soaring mountain peaks flickered and flashed with crimson flame.

Steve crouched on his heels, behind a protecting rock, watching the men below. Under Davis's direction they were chopping brush, snaking it into position, and throwing a stout fence across the narrow throat of the gorge, thus corralling the cattle. The work went forward swiftly, in less than an hour was finished. Then, leaving Pete Henley and Jim Link with the corralled beeves, Davis, with the three remaining men, mounted and rode back down the canyon. Steve saw them turn across the valley, heading east toward the Bar C.

At last the play was clear; it was Davis's intention to return to Linda, to tell her that somehow the herd had been lost. Henley and Link would later move the cattle to some isolated point and there sell the beeves. Davis was returning to Linda simply because this rustling of her beef herd was only the beginning of a gigantic steal, his voracious hope to strip her eventually of every speck of property.

Steve had wanted proof, now he had it. His logical move was to trail Davis back to the ranch, and there, in front of Linda, confront him with his act. In the meantime, however, it was possible that Henley might move the cattle, that they would be lost to Linda irrevocably. Steve thought about that, and then formed a course of action.

Drawing his gun, keeping concealed in the thick chaparral, he worked his way cautiously down the canyon side toward the two men below. Henley and Jim Link had spread a slicker in the shade of a gnarled piñon, were seated cross-legged, playing poker. Steve closed in on them. A large boulder, half buried in dense undergrowth, stood

about twenty feet from the two men. Curving past this was a deep rain wash. Steve eased into the wash. Hidden by its banks, he crept on his hands and knees to that shielding rock. There he rose up suddenly, his gun leveled, and spoke curtly:

"H'ist 'em! Both of you! 'Way up!"

The two men leaped to their feet. Jim Link elevated his arms instinctively, but Pete Henley more startled than anything else, whirled violently aside, jerking his gun. He fired in one smooth, snaky motion. The bullet knocked Steve's sombrero from his head just as his own weapon blasted savagely back. Henley spun sideways, dropping his gun and clutching a bleeding shoulder. He stared up, his face gray with pain and sudden shock.

"Canton!" he blurted. "Why, you danged——"

"Save it," Steve advised. "You got a long ride ahead of you, hombre."

LINDA MARTIN stood in the big living room of the adobe staring in startled amazement at the four sweating men who had just dashed up on lathered broncs, leaped to ground, and run gasping into the house. The four men were Dan Davis and his three hard-faced riders. One of the men had an arm bandaged, tied across the middle of his stomach, and Davis's head was bound with a torn shirt, stained red.

"Miss Linda!" Davis blurted. "I—I don't know how to tell you this. The—the herd's gone!"

"Gone?" Linda echoed. "Why—why what do you mean, Dan? Why—why, Dan, you're hurt! And you, Ed! Your arm!"

"Never mind us," Davis returned. "But the cattle, Miss Linda! A dozen masked riders jumped us last night. The boys put up a game fight, but we didn't stand a chance. They grabbed the herd an' headed over the pass!"

"Where's Henley?" Linda exclaimed suddenly. "Pete Henley and Jim Link! Where are they, Dan?"

Davis shook his head slowly, stared glumly at the floor.

"Dead, miss. They went out fighting, like we all tried, for you an' your herd. We buried Pete Henley an' Jim back there in the valley, miss."

Linda said, "Oh," in a low voice. Her eyes were blank and staring. "I don't mind losing the cattle," she whispered, "but—but Jim and Pete killed! I—I——"

Suddenly the girl gasped; she straightened, gazing past Davis to the open door, her eyes flared, amazed, unbelieving. Davis sensed that startled glance, heard a shuffling step, and whirled violently. His hand leaped to his gun. Then he jerked motionless, his jaw dropping. For two men, their hands tied behind them, had just walked into the room. The two men were Pete Henley and Jim Link. Behind them, lounging in the doorway, a leveled gun in his hand, stood Steve Canton. Steve Canton grinned.

"Miss Linda," he drawled, "here's the two men that got killed in that fight last night. Davis buried them back in the valley."

For an instant, Davis stared blankly. Then he cursed bitterly. His gun lashed up instinctively, and he fired. Steve had crouched like a flash, his own gun, already drawn, bursting into a thunderous roll. Davis spun around and pitched flat on his face. The whole room was a sudden blur of whirling bodies, the three riders leaping desperately rearward, clawing for their guns. Linda

gave a stifled scream. She stepped impulsively forward. Steve saw her move, saw her step blindly into the line of a swiftly rising gun. He never hesitated; of its own accord his tall body catapulted forward, flung itself directly between the girl and that suddenly blazing gun. Then he staggered rearward, the bullet that would have killed Linda Martin buried in his own chest. His eyes blurred, but still his gun flamed on. He whipped it savagely, from right to left, three smashing shots. Two of the riders, their guns spitting fire, sank sideways; the third threw up his arms, screaming:

"Hold it! That's enough! Hold it, I tell you!"

It was all over. In less than one minute. Steve didn't know just what had happened. His face was gray, and blood was rapidly staining his shirt high up on the left side. He stared at Linda.

"Take Davis's gun, Miss Linda. You better cover these fellows. Your cattle are in a canyon about ten miles north of the pass. It was all bluff, those bandages on Davis an' the other hombre—they aimed to steal your herd, your whole ranch. I—reckon that's—that's all, Miss Linda. Except you're so dog-gone pretty. Dog-gone pretty——" He grinned and pitched forward, and his face hit the floor with a soft smack.

LINDA got help from a neighboring ranch. Her cattle were recovered, and her five riders, two of them badly wounded, were turned over to the Mecca sheriff. They didn't arrest Davis. They buried him.

A month later, still weak, a little shaky, Steve Canton sat in the moonlight on the long porch of the old adobe, and beside him, slim and lovely, sat Linda Martin.

"I tell you it's no use," Steve insisted. "It's been a blind trail from the beginning. That first day when I found you, that night when I followed the cattle and Davis—I guess I've never followed anything but blind trails all my life."

"Of course." Linda nodded. "That's the only kind there are, blind trails. Think how terrible it would be if you knew all about to-morrow, if nothing surprising and wonderful could ever happen. Why, that's what makes life worth living, not knowing, just hoping and trying and——"

Steve shook his head bitterly. "Girl," he said, "it jus' won't work. Why, you own the biggest ranch in the county. You're rich, an' I'm a drifter. In the end you'd never be sure what I married, you or the ranch."

"I don't own a ranch," Linda said, "and I'm not rich. I've been sunk in debt for a year. I couldn't pay up a dozen notes, and last week while you were still sick in bed, I had to sign over the ranch. I haven't a penny left, nothing but the clothes I'm wearing."

For a long moment Steve Canton stared at the slender girl in blank amazement.

She said in a low voice, "I don't know what I'll do, where to go—maybe I'll starve!"

Suddenly he was remembering her as he had first found her, alone, dejected, afoot with a twisted ankle. And again, as then, he knew that deep flood of abiding tenderness, the desire only to help and comfort her, to care for her always. He took her in his arms.

"Why, honey, I never knew. Why, don't you care? I—I'll take care of you. I'll get me a fine job. I'll——"

"You better kiss me," Linda said. "You talk too much."

Their lips met. And then Steve knew that this girl had somehow become a part of himself, that never again could they be separated. Linda said:

"You're crazy, mister. Thinking the ranch counted. Why, you saved my life, almost gave your own, and tried to save my ranch, and you stole my heart. The meanest thing you could have done would have been to go off and leave me alone!"

"You'll never be alone now, honey!"

"You mean that, mister?"

"I swear it."

"No matter what happens?"

"No matter what happens!"

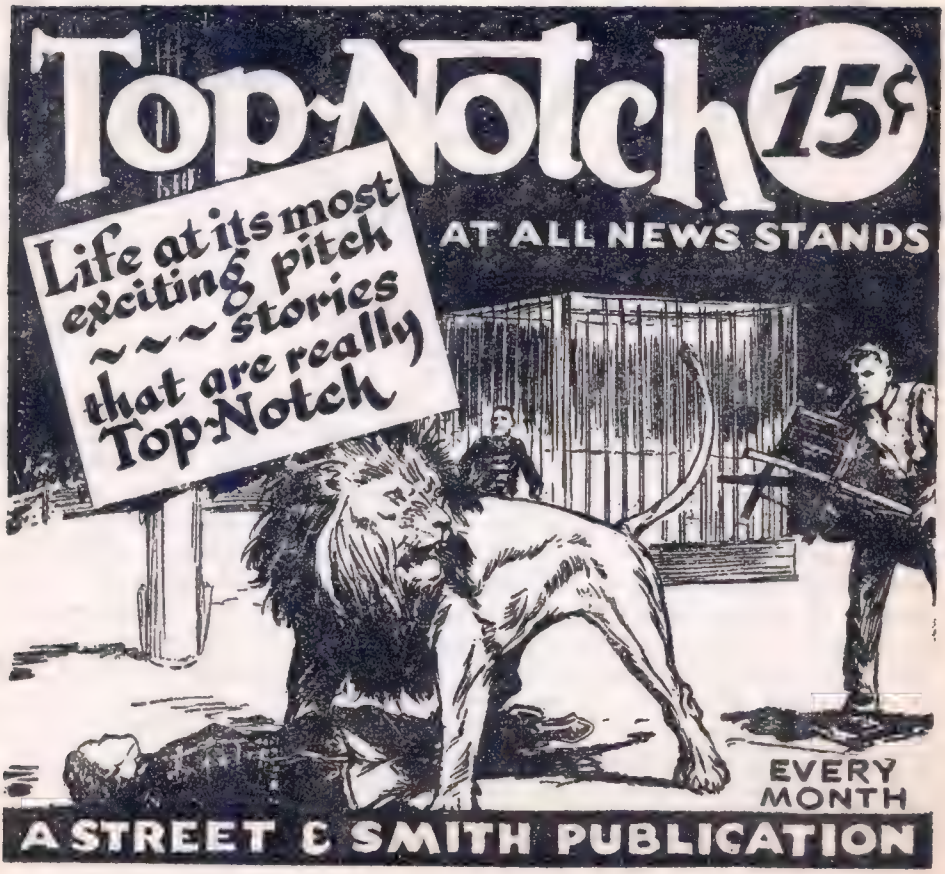
"Even when you know I'm a liar?"

He stared at her.

She spoke swiftly. "Of course, Steve. I had to lie to make you speak out, to prove to you that the ranch didn't count. I haven't lost it. But if you say the word, I'll sell it to-morrow and burn the money!"

For a long moment he was silent, brooding. She kissed him. More than words her kiss told him what he longed to believe, that between one man and one woman, their need for each other can never be measured in land or gold or human words. He nodded.

"It's all right, girl. I love you."



PLAIN MOUNTAIN FOLKS

By JOHN BRIGGS

Author of "Hill-billy," etc.

INSIDE the one-room mountain shack, Obe Pressley's two-year-old boy was squalling at the top of his lungs. The youngster's mother had shut him in, so that she could get her stove wood chopped without danger of hitting him with the ax or a stick. The infant's shrieking did not annoy Obe, who was seated in the front doorway resting one foot on the sagging step. The door hinges were broken, and so the front door was never closed during the summertime when the days were warm and the nights not too cold.

Anyhow, Obe didn't mind sitting in the doorway, just to keep the child inside. He reckoned that it did pester Julia to have the baby fooling around while she was chopping wood. He allowed that a man ought to try and make the work a little easier for his woman, now and then. Only it seemed lately that Julia wasn't appreciating it like she'd ought to. He eyed a heap of freshly whittled shavings and spat upon it reflectively.

He calculated that he'd just snaked in enough wood to last his woman 'most a week, now that it

was summertime. Sometimes she was a mite extravagant, though. She'd get in a hurry with her cooking and leave the stove damper open. That let most of the heat go up the flue and burned too much wood. And it was getting so that he had to ride quite a long ways to find a dead limb that he could drop his rope over and drag in by the saddle horn.

But Obe was considerate. He realized that his wife had to hurry the cooking along when she came in late from hoeing the beans, or from milking the cows and so on. Of course, he liked to eat on time, but he never growled much if dinner happened to be a little late. He wasn't ashamed to have folks know that he was good to his woman. He was the kind of a buck that allowed a woman to have her own way once in a while. All he asked was that it be appreciated. But Julia had taken to complaining a lot, nowadays. All women were like that, he reckoned. They could always find something to complain about.

HE glanced speculatively up the winding grade of the main road which fronted his clearing. Littered about the ground close to the doorstep, a dozen or more fine-looking shepherd dogs, attentive to his every move, lifted their slender muzzles and also glanced up the road. The pack was orderly and quiet.

During a lull in the baby's squall, Obe listened to the tune of the ax that sounded from the back of the cabin and echoed musically across the canyon. A gentle afternoon breeze commenced stirring the pines. He unfolded his legs and rested forward on his knees. It was taking Julia a little longer than usual today. She was a mite more careful, now, since she'd had an eye most knocked out with one of those crooked sticks.

It was kind of odd she hadn't done any complaining about that, either. Come to think of it, Julia didn't do any outright complaining. Just made remarks that he couldn't quite catch the drift of. Just the same, she had taken to acting strange. And they'd only been married a little better than three years.

The chopping sounds stopped finally. He could hear Julia picking up an armload of sticks. Presently the back door opened gratingly after considerable jerking to pull it loose from the sagged frame. Julia's quick steps creaked across the floor. Wood clattered into the box, and the stove lids were briskly rattled.

The sounds indicated that the "taters" would be put on to boil, and then Julia would go out to milk the cows. Obe didn't have to turn and look inside to know that his chore of minding the youngster was ended. But there was an abrupt cessation of sound within the cabin. The baby had stopped yelling, and Julia's usual industry seemed strangely halted. Obe felt something like a chill creeping up along his spine. And then the foreboding hush was shattered by a volley of words that made him jump.

"Well, jest keep a-settin' there! Or go somewheres else and flop yoreself down. 'Tain't material to me, only I'd like to have a clear look at the road, while the door's open. It'll be shet all next winter, and then I can't look out, if I'm still a-stayin' here! I like to see folks go by, when they do, without you in the picture to remind me why we don't ever travel anywheres!"

In a slow, thunderstruck way, Obe twisted about until he could bestow upon his wife a dumfounded stare.

She stood squarely facing him. Health of youth, sunshine, and fresh air lent attraction to her shapely figure. Her oval, tanned cheeks were flushed and damp from recent ax wielding. The sunbonnet pushed back from her high forehead had released straying locks of pale-golden hair. She was a pretty picture of feminine indignation.

"Why, whatever has got into you, Julie?" Obe gasped. "Aire you complainin' jest at my looks? I reckon a feller's looks ain't bounden to improve none with time. But yore's hain't wore out none to speak of, Julia," he added as a placating afterthought.

The compliment only added fuel to Julia's outburst.

"I'm all wore out at complainin' and hintin', Obe," she declared. "All because I never thought 'twas right I should talk up to menfolks. But I can't hold back no longer, Obe. I've stood bein' cooped up here fer more'n three years now. I started bucklin' right in, so's to help you along. So's mebbe we could be well fixed and enjoy livin' afore we're too old to. And what good has it done? The more I tuk aholt, the more you jest let go and set around!"

"Why, er—Julia—I thought we had——" Obe gulped.

"Shet up till I've had my say, first and last!" the young woman blazed. "We ain't even been down to the county seat once since we married. Course, jest plain mountain folks don't have honeymoons! And it ain't that I minded. I was plannin' we could travel later on. Afore we married, you was away and worked on the cattle ranches fer four years, savin' yore money. You came back all slicked and upstandin', wearin' fine boots and a silk shirt. I was jest a little fool that thought you was different than the others. I thought you was jest grand, Obe. I thought you had lots of git-up, and we'd be livin' different than the rest. Then you bought this here place. And the fust year, you plowed a few acres. You plowed less each year, instead of clearin' and plantin' more. This year, you jest plowed two acres and tuk to settin' while I planted beans and done all the hoein'.

"It ain't that I mind work, Obe," she amended more quietly. "Only yo're jest turned into a shiftless, no-account——"

"But, Julie," Obe appealed, "I've——"

"Yes, you've raised dogs!" his young wife snapped. "Raised a passell of wuthless, lazy shepherds. And it takes all my work and what little you do to feed 'em!"

Obe suddenly bristled up. "You've done talked aplenty, woman!" he announced. "It's enough to know how we stand. Mebbe you've said somethin', at that. I've kinda let farmin' slide, since it's tuk so much o' my time trainin' the dawgs. But they hain't wuthless. Cattlemen pays good money fer shepherds like them. As long as we've tuk in enough from the road to live on, I aimed to make our real fo'tune offn the dawgs. We've got twenty o' the best-workin' cattle dawgs in Californy, with more comin' on——"

"And you ain't sold airy a one!" Julia supplied.

Obe's big shoulders slumped, and he lowered his head. A pained look came into his eyes. Something of the scorn left Julia's face as she looked at him. Her eyes softened.

"It ain't that, Obe," she remarked almost wistfully. "I know how you hate to sell one that you've trained and worked with. But it's jest like

you care more for the dogs than me. Where's even a start on the fine home we was agoin' to build with all the money the dogs 'ud bring? Where's the bed springs and hair mattress? And the talkin' machine? Which all I could do without, if you'd jest show that you think of me a little more, Obe—afore I'm an ole woman all dried up with work! You could 'a' sold Blanky to that big cattleman fer a hundred dollars. Oh, I know how hard 'twould 'a' been fer you to let him go, Obe. It jest seems like dogs is all yo're wrapped up in. I'm only a kind of an animal that don't 'mount to much aside of them."

"Julie!" the big mountaineer broke out, springing to his feet. "I —I never thought——" He gulped and stopped short with his arms extended, repulsed by her stony look.

"Not that a way, Obe!" she declared. "I don't want attentions I have to beg fer. You better go on down to the road and jest set down to yore evenin' chore, like you alluz do. Try and fergit my scoldin'. Mebbe you ken do a little thinkin' right down to solid ground, and figure out where yo're a-driftin' to. Only I don't want to do much more driftin' with you, Obe. And I don't aim fer yore son to, either!"

AS Obe stepped from the doorway with lowered head, the group of dogs had been increased by a dozen more. Every shepherd stood to instant attention. By quietly speaking a name, he could have signaled any one of them to follow him, and the rest would have remained. Instead, he merely lifted and lowered his open palm, and every dog obediently stayed on guard at the cabin. He strode down toward the main road and the gate bars which opened out to it from his meadow. Reaching the bars, he let down the top one, stepped across, and sat down facing the road and resting his back to the post. Just above his head, a small signboard advertised milk, butter, and eggs for sale, also horse feed. Carefully he measured a fresh chew, whittled it from the plug, then applied himself to his usual evening chore of waiting for campers.

His place was situated conveniently for travelers who might prefer to make camp before climbing another grade. It was in the broad canyon between two high ridges, so that travelers passing either way had to climb a long, dry grade after leaving it. The creek shallowed out where the wagon bridge crossed it, and here was a good level camping place. But the tall timber crowded down close to the road, and the only horse pasturage was inclosed by his fences.

Obe rested his head on his folded arms, over his raised knees. His reflections were not cheerful, and his thoughts kept repeating in circles that sort of dazed him. His habit of taking a little cat nap at this time finally asserted itself.

He failed to hear the arrival of the wagon outfit that had stopped at the camp site by the creek. He was aroused by a voice that grated suddenly against his ears. Evidently the speaker was addressing a companion.

"Hanged if I know whether he's asleep or dead, or only deaf and dumb!"

Obe gave a startled gulp, looked up, and grinned before he had visually appraised the two men who were approaching him. The taller one halted and peered curiously down at him out of agate-bright eyes that hugged a beaklike nose. The fellow had a flapping appear-

ance, stooped and flat-chested, with dangling arms and a hollow waist line. His companion stood slightly back of him, blinking at Obe from small eyes that were deep-set in puffy red cheeks. A tight gun belt encircled his tublike waist, and a black shirt refused to infold his bulging hulk. Its open front disclosed his double chin.

"Evenin', strangers," Obe greeted without rising. "If yo're wantin' to turn yore stock in the medder, this here's the gate. Fifteen cents a head, overnight. You ken pay now, and leave in the mornin' as early as yo're a mind to."

"That's terrible high fer green feed," the fat man complained. "We've got four horses. It'd pay us to travel on till we find grass."

His angular partner had stepped forward and was inspecting the faded sign above Obe's head.

"Do you hold folks up fer milk, too?" he asked.

"Don't hold nobody up fer nothin'!" Obe protested. "My woman sells milk fer a nickel a quart."

"Well, I'll buy a gallon, if you'll fetch it here," the lean traveler offered. "We've got a dog that's sick and won't eat. Mebbe he'll drink milk, if it's fresh."

Obe's curiosity was aroused at mention of a sick dog. He rose slowly and stretched.

"I'll fetch a gallon that's fresh milked," he said.

"Ain't four bits enough fer four horses?" demanded the fat man.

"I'll split the difference, and make it six bits even fer the hoss pasture and the milk," Obe bargained.

The big fellow extracted the coins from a purse of surprising bulge and weight.

Obe imparted his low opinion of the travelers to Julia as she measured out a gallon of milk for him to take back.

"I wouldn't stand fer no sech road trash comin' up to the house," he explained to justify his errand. "They want this fer a sick dawg. The dawg must 'a' tuk sick o' their company. They lookin' like plain hoss thieves, to me."

Julia straightened up and flashed him a side glance from her blue eyes.

"Well, take 'em their milk and ask if they want butter or eggs," she ordered crisply. "That sign's gettin' so folks can't read it."

•

AS Obe approached the camp, he saw the tall wagon tramp climbing up the hillside after dry wood. Tied to a wheel of the wagon was a gaunt, black dog that had all the points of a shepherd, except that it lacked the usual tan markings. Without lifting its shaggy head from its paws, it rolled bright, inquiring eyes up at Obe.

"He's been gettin' snappy," warned the fat man, who stepped up with a bucket in which to take the milk. "Don't get too close."

"Ain't he a shepherd?" Obe inquired.

"Yeh, got some shepherd in him," affirmed the other.

While the fellow was pouring some milk into a pan, Obe stooped and stroked the dog's broad intelligent head. The shepherd made no response, merely eying him without rancor.

"I said, look out!" snapped the red-faced camper, suddenly turning. "He's tricky!"

The dog gave a low, almost inaudible growl, as Obe straightened up, but it was directed at the man who was shoving a pan of milk in front of it. Obe's square, stolid face became studied as he glanced at the big, lean dog and then at the man.

He reckoned there was only one kind of a man that a shepherd would snap at—a thief or one whose intention was to molest.

The black shepherd sniffed at the milk and inched toward it. The dog made hungry lappings as if about to drink it. And then, baring its wolflike fangs, it suddenly drew back, turned its head away and again rested its slender nose on its paws, its eyes suddenly half closed.

With an oath, the beefy-faced camper kicked the pan, splashing its contents over the dog. The starved animal neither moved nor cringed.

"That's how he does!" raged the beefy party. "Acts like he's goin' to eat, then turns away from it!"

Obe reflected that the traveler's irritation was probably caused by the prospect of a monetary loss, in case the animal should die. Certainly it was not due to sympathy for the beast. The dog's sullen eyes seemed to betray a deliberate refusal of food as one means of escape from strange masters.

Despite the camper's repeated warning, the young mountaineer again knelt and stroked the black shepherd's oddly-marked head. Rising at last, he announced mildly:

"Yore dawg's agoin' to die soon, mister. Might be I could cure him, if I was to keep him here and work on him. You cain't pull him through, long's yo're on the road, this a way."

The wagoner's little crinkly eyes craftily squinted at him from folds of flesh.

"My pardner thinks he ken cure him," he said. "He's worth money to cattlemen, too. I'd sooner take a chance on him dyin' than let him go fer nothin'."

Obe observed the tall, stooped partner lugging an armload of branches down the timbered slope.

"I raise cattle dawgs, my own self," he stolidly replied. "And I know thet this here one's already a-dyin'."

"Yeah, I noticed you had a bunch o' dogs," the other admitted. "But this one's still worth somethin', as long as he's alive. You think you ken save him. Any cattleman 'ud give a heap to own him—after seein' him work," the fellow added with a queer expression.

OBE believed that he could save the shepherd by winning its friendship. But he reckoned it would just about clinch the trouble between him and Julia, if he should buy the dog. He met the ponderous wagon tramp's gaze with a level look.

"I hain't askin' no questions, nor lookin' fer nobody's dawg," he said. "But you hain't fooled me none, mister. You ken leave him with me, and I'll disremember how I got him. Or I ken reckon he jest strayed in, if anybody asks."

The other's puffy features went white with wrath.

"I don't take that kinda talk from nobody!" he frothed. "I didn't steal that dog!" His hand moved stealthily toward his gun.

Obe's eyes slowly narrowed. He lifted his left hand and thrust it open in front of the big man's face, showing a plain black smudge on his palm.

"You'd oughta 'a' knowed that milk loosens up dyes and sech like," he remarked calmly. "You'd oughtn't to kicked the pan and splashed that on his head. No use gettin' excited, mister. You might lead me down, 'cuz I ain't armed. But you wouldn't get nowhere's out o' these here hills."

"Well, I didn't steal the dog!" the camper repeated, calming a little.

"You ken have him fer ten dollars. If you knowed what he's worth, you'd jump at the chance!"

"I'm short," said Obe. "Make it four dollars."

"Mebbe your woman holds the purse strings," suggested the burly trader. "You'd ought to be able to double that!"

At that moment, his elongated partner sidled up and bent an attentive ear to the discussion. The two of them finally agreed to let the dog go for six dollars.

Returning to his house, Obe sat down at the table and bolted his supper in embarrassed silence. Gulping down the last swallow in desperation, he glanced up at his wife and broke the news that he needed two dollars more than he possessed, in order to buy a sick dog.

Julia dropped her fork and stared at him, her eyes wide and questioning. Obe stammeringly tried to explain about the dog being heartsick and needing some coddling to make it eat, and it was a pity the way the animal was dying for lack of a little friendliness.

Julia continued to stare at him in a wild, despairing way. Suddenly she rushed from the table, threw herself onto the bed and sobbed hysterically. Obe's blundering attempts to console her excited her the more. He felt awkward and completely beyond his depth. From her sobbed answers to his entreaties, he gathered that it didn't matter about the money. He was the man of the house and he didn't have to ask her for spending money. She just wanted to be left alone.

In consternation, Obe scratched his head and allowed that maybe he hadn't ought to take on another dog, anyhow. But Julia wailingly insisted that he buy it. She wouldn't ever forgive herself if she made him think she was a heartless woman!

Obe shook his head in a bewildered manner. Finally he took down an old tin coffeepot and counted out two dollars in silver. Then he trudged out and bought the dog.

His own shepherds greeted the newcomer with suspicion which might have turned into hostility, if they had not been so well trained. Food for them was cooked every day in an outside vat. From the vat, Obe dipped out a mixture of corn meal, cracklings, and clabbered milk. He poured for all of the dogs into one long trough, from which the pack ate without much wrangling. He set down the bucket containing a small portion of the pottage. Patting the black dog, he removed the collar and chain, then turned away and commenced washing out the vat. Covertly he watched.

SENSING his freedom, the lean stranger made a sniffing tour of the premises. Frequently he looked at the other dogs eating their fill. Finally he trotted back to the bucket and made a finicky test of its contents. Questioningly he glanced at his new master who appeared not to notice him. In a moment, he was eagerly lapping the clabbered milk.

That night, Obe chained him by the cabin door, so that he could remain outside or come in and thus take refuge from mob attack. Several friendly overtures were made him by the home shepherds. But a few incipient fights had to be quelled. For the latter reason, and because he was otherwise troubled, Obe, spent a sleepless night. Julia was very quiet, but he was sure that she was not sleeping, either. Once when he got up and lighted the

lamp, he noticed that her eyes were open and that she was stonily observing him.

A few days sufficed to acquaint the black shepherd with his new home and master. He responded to the name of Blacky, whether he had owned another name or not. Scrubbing removed none of his black coloring except about the eyes, muzzle, and apron. Those parts came out tawny and gave him more of a wolf appearance than before. Rapidly he took on husky weight. With very little hostility, the others accepted him, especially the younger shepherds that were inclined to ally themselves to his leadership. Some of the others shunned him. And King, the patriarch of the pack, who was of noble shepherd lineage, resented his presence with increasing animosity. Blacky, however, was too wise to make the first offensive move, probably knowing that he would be mobbed. And King was so far containing his feelings like a gentleman. Blacky's unusual size and strength made Obe fear for King, in case of trouble. Otherwise he was pleased with his experiment.

But between Julia and him an imponderable barrier existed. He was not gifted with words, and each day it became harder for him to talk. Thinking only increased his gnawing ache. He was determined to show, somehow, that he did really appreciate her. He allowed that he'd done her wrong unknowingly, and that he'd always taken too much for granted. In dumb, bungling ways, he tried to show his affection. He snaked in a lot of wood and started chopping it up. But Julia stopped him. She declared that she was no better than other mountain women who didn't complain about chopping, hoeing, and milking. There were other things that he could do.

Obe figured that over for a day or two, and then had an inspiration to add a new room to the house. With ax and team, he worked prodigiously getting out logs. He felled a sugar pine for shakes and flooring, hewed out frames, and commenced laying the foundation. He boiled over with enthusiasm. And if Julia smiled at all, it was always a sad, reserved sort of smile, although she helped him plan the new room. Obe couldn't seem to grasp the right angle of their trouble somehow. A little of his enthusiasm subsided, but he kept doggedly at it.

HE was too busy to watch the road. And so he was not at his old post one afternoon when a light double rig came down the west grade at a spanking pace and drew up at the gate. The driver bellowed at the top of his lungs. Obe heard the shouts and hurried down to the road. Before reaching the bars, he recognized his excited visitor as Neil Crayton, a big sheepman who summered his woollies in the meadows on the Sierra divide.

"I need help, Pressley," he announced. "I've got a little bunch o' ewes over on the other side o' the ridge. The herder dang near blew off his foot last night with a shotgun. Now I want you to bring the flock as far as your place and pasture 'em for me till I can send out another herder to take 'em on up to the divide."

"Shore, I'll help you out," Obe thoughtfully agreed. "Only I'll have to turn 'em in the medder, and sheep'll kinda ruin the feed."

The sheepman frowned impatiently. "Will fifty dollars cover the damages—say, for three days?" he demanded. And as Obe hesitated, he explained. "Coyotes got three o' them fancy ewes last night.

And I don't take less'n thirty dollars a head for those breeders. How about twenty-five dollars a day to pasture and watch 'em? You've got enough good dogs to keep off the coyotes. I'll buy a couple from you, too. The coyotes killed one o' mine last night. I wouldn't 'a' took a hundred dollars for him! The fool herder was pullin' the gun outta his pack, and shot himself with it!"

"All right," said Obe; "I'll saddle my hoss and be right with you."

Crayton was looking at some of the shepherds that had quietly followed the mountaineer.

"I understand you only train 'em for cattle work," he commented.

"A good dawg'll herd cattle, hosses, sheep, hawgs, or turkeys!" Obe declared.

The sheepman was still staring past him, frowning in a puzzled way.

"Where'd the big black one come from?" he demanded.

Turning about, Obe noticed Blacky a short distance behind the younger shepherds. He replied evasively that some shepherds naturally came out black. And the sheepman was too much preoccupied to question further.

Quickly Obe saddled his horse, then rode up to the house. Hurriedly he explained to Julia about his chance to make seventy-five or a hundred dollars, besides possibly selling a couple of dogs.

She listened almost listlessly. "You alluz said you wouldn't sell yore dogs to a sheepman," she remarked.

"Their money's as good as cattlemen's," he retorted, lowering his face.

Just before nightfall, he returned with the small flock of two hundred prize ewes. With the sheep came Crayton's trusty shepherd dog whose mate had been killed the night before. Obe left the herd in that one's charge, fully assured that his own dogs would never allow any coyotes to get near the place. In fact, most of them were eager to watch the sheep closely, but he called them away, not wanting them to worry the rightful guardian. Obe was amused when he noticed that Blacky was inclined to keep away in the background, entirely away from the sheep. He reckoned that Blacky was a full-fledged cattle dog with a cattleman's scorn of sheep.

But his reckoning fell short. That night's massacre of ewes proved that Blacky was a sheep killer and that he had misled several of the younger shepherds. The bedlam that sounded from the meadow brought Obe out of bed scantily clad and armed with his rifle. Faint moonlight showed him a mêlée in which sheep and apparently his whole pack of shepherds were writhing in a growling, bleating mass. Frantically, he waded into the shambles, striking right and left at dogs, fearing to shoot lest he kill sheep or innocent shepherds, if such there were.

PAINFULLY he discovered that the affair had already resolved itself into a battle between the dogs themselves. Old King and his mate Mab, emerged gashed and bleeding. Others were suffering minor injuries. The dead were Blacky and three young, untrained shepherds, also the valiant defender of the flock. Almost stunned by the calamity, Obe was finally able to figure it all out. Blacky had undoubtedly corrupted the younger dogs and had instigated an orgy of sheep killings. King and

the others had come to the rescue too late to save the faithful sheep dog and a number of ewes.

By the time Obe stood dazedly viewing the scene of havoc, Julia arrived with a lantern. They counted forty-three slain sheep.

Obe lived through the ordeal of the several following weeks in a stony, hopeless way. From Crayton, he took all the verbal abuse he could stand. The sheepman told him also that he'd had suspicions of that black dog. Events proved him to be the same one that had organized a pack of killers down around Chico. Somehow, those wagon tramps had got hold of him. Doubtless they had planned to dispose of him to cattlemen in Nevada who were trying to run out the sheep-herders.

Indifferently, Obe waited for Crayton's damage proceedings to close him out. On the day of the public auction, his place, implements, and live stock all fell under the hammer, excepting a team, wagon, and one cow. The law entitled him to seventy chickens, but he only retained a dozen. Cattlemen and sheepmen had come from a considerable distance to bid on his dogs. Stolidly he sat and watched them go, one by one. Julia sat beside him, her hands tightly clasped under her apron. He was aroused from his apathy as the sale neared its end. He noticed that old King and Mab were not in the pen from which the dogs were being taken. He had penned the dogs himself, but had been too heartsick to notice that they were missing. Now he glanced at Julia, and she interpreted his puzzled look. A light that he had not seen lately stole into her eyes. She reached out a small, brown hand and squeezed one of his.

The following day, Obe started out with his remaining team drawing his wagonload of household goods and a crate of hens. Proud and straight, Julia sat on the high seat beside him holding the baby. Tied to the wagon end was a rebellious cow. Following the cow, to see that it kept going, trotted old King and Mab. Without that proud pair of shepherds, there had been enough to settle all damage costs, leaving a few dollars for Obe's pocket. But they would have been sold with the others, had they been present at the auction.

A smile spread over Obe's broad, bronzed face. He turned to the bright-eyed young woman beside him.

"Honey, I'm shore tickled, the way you snuk out King and Mab yestiddy," he said. "You'd needn't 'a' bawled last night over losin' the others!"

"It warn't over losin' 'em, so much, Obe," she replied, and after an embarrassed pause, explained: "'Twas account o' my bein' all to blame for yore not carin'."

"Shore I cared," Obe answered. "Only I wasn't lettin' on." Thoughtfully he added: "From now on, I'll do more lettin' on!"

"Yo're a good cowman, Obe," Julia commented. "I was proud yesterday to hear that big cattleman praise you, when he offered you the job. You'll make good on it, and I'll be a-cookin' at the ranch house. In no time, we'll save up enough to start with our own cows. And we'll need good dogs!"

On the jolting wagon, their beaming faces sprayed with fine dust, they rode on and dreamed, planning together with hope anew. Somehow each felt a calm assurance that, this time, they were starting off on the right foot.

YELLOW SHERIFF

By JOSEPH F. HOOK

Author of "Whistling Water," etc.

THE most memorable event in the history of Mirage took place when a sorry cavalcade plowed its way slowly through the deep dust of Main Street. Only an occasional sob or exclamation of pity from the women on the sidewalk broke the sinister stillness of that blistering hot afternoon.

In the van of the cavalcade rode a posse man, and behind him, tied tail to halter rope, came four horses. Across the saddles, lashed securely by lariats, were the bodies of four men, their heads and limbs swaying grotesquely with every movement of the animals. Following them rode another man, head on chest, hands manacled to the saddle horn, feet roped under the horse's belly. On either flank were more posse men, stern of face, vigilant, their hands resting lightly on the guns in their belts.

Next in line came three other posse men. The first wore a bandage around his head, from beneath which blood oozed down his cheeks, cutting tiny rills in the caked alkali dust. The second carried an arm in an improvised sling. The third, his face ghastly and distorted with agony, tried to favor a shattered leg that dangled limply by his horse's side .

Sheriff Tom Turner brought up the rear of the cavalcade, his lips dry and cracked from sun and alkali dust, his gaze turning neither to the

right or left, an expression in his eyes that boded ill for some one.

When the cavalcade halted at the jail and the sheriff had locked the handcuffed rider in a cell, the awed silence was shattered by groans, curses, and the angry murmuring of many men. An occasional scream rent the air when a woman in the crowd recognized the presence of a loved one among the four bodies that had been lashed to the saddles.

WHEN at last the sheriff emerged from the jail and signaled his posse to take the bodies to the undertaker, the crowd surged forward and pinned him against the jail door.

"Now, boys, listen to me!" the officer shouted, realizing the crowd's intentions. "Don't try to stage no necktie party. I've just jugged Curly Torrence, and he'll get the rope when the time comes."

"It's come now, sheriff," a voice called from the mob. "To hell with the law! He's ours, so let's have him."

"He's not yours; he's mine," the sheriff shouted back, trying to make his voice heard above the cries of approbation that accompanied the demand. "I ketched him; and if you'll just hold yore hosses for a while, I'll ketch the rest of the rotten gang."

"You're yellow!" another voice yelled. "You're scairt of that dirty Torrence gang and what they'll do to you if you leave us hang Curly."

The officer's eyes roved the crowd over until they fixed themselves on the speaker with a baleful glare.

"I'm yellow, huh?" he said in a voice that cut like a whiplash. "Well, step right up here, man to man, Chuck Layman, and tell me that to my face. Don't hide back in the crowd. I ain't yellow. I'm just trying to use hoss sense. And what you just said is right—about what the Torrence gang will do if I let you hang Curly. But it ain't only me they'll try to kill; they'll get a raft of you boys, too."

"Let 'em come," somebody challenged. "We'll be ready."

"I reckon you just *think* you'll be ready," the sheriff retorted. "You was ketched asleep when they swooped down and robbed the bank; and you wasn't ready the next time they come and held up the saloon, killed the barkeep, and wounded women and kids on the street. And if you think the Torrence gang'll drop you a post card saying when they pay their next visit, you're crazy."

"All right, you yaller coyote," a voice yelled; "if you ain't gonna hand Curly over, we'll come git him!"

The sheriff pushed the men away from in front of him and drew his guns. His mouth was white and tight-lipped, and a fierce light burned in his eyes.

"Listen," he snarled. "You know me, boys. I savvy just how you feel, but you ain't got nothing on me in that respect. I saw these boys shot down, and you didn't. I wanna see the Torrence gang rounded up and hanged higher than a kite, but it's gotta be done according to law. Pussonally, I've had enough of this killing, but if you want some more, just come right ahead."

There was a good deal of murmuring after that challenge, but it finally died away. Those irate men of Mirage knew their sheriff, even if a few thought him yellow, and they knew that he backed up his statements with action.

So they moved away a short distance, split up into groups, and began talking matters over in hur-

ried whispers. A deputy stepped to the sheriff's side, his face a study in concern.

"You know what they're talkin' about, sheriff?" he cried breathlessly. "The danged fools is aimin' to ride after the Torrence gang! They'll cut their own throats, if you don't stop 'em!"

THE sheriff brushed him aside and started after the mob that was now beginning to scatter. When he caught up with the men, he called on them to stop and listen to him.

"Boys," he shouted, "you're all going home, and right there's where you'll stay. I won't see you ride to yore deaths, and that's flat!"

"And what're *you* gonna do about it, sheriff?" a voice demanded. "I guess we can go where we like."

"Not after the Torrence gang, you can't. And if it comes to a showdown, I'll arrest the whole blamed bunch of you and slam you in the jug till you cool off."

"Who said he wasn't yellow?" an ugly voice demanded. "He's scairt. Who'll go along with me, fellers?"

"Just a minute afore you decide that," the sheriff pleaded. "You can call me yellow, but later on I'll make every man that's called me that eat his own words. You wanna kill Curly Torrence, huh? Well, I promise that each and every one of you'll get the chance, but not by mob vi'lence. I'll promise you that."

"And when do we git the chance? Right now?" some one asked.

"Gimme time to think things over, boys. I've been in the saddle for days, and I'm all in."

More murmuring followed that plea, and finally the cooler heads in the mob were able to have their say. At last a man stepped forward and addressed the sheriff.

"We'll give you three days to rest up, and then we'll want action. In the meantime, you gotta give yore word that you won't either spirit Curly away or have the gov'nor call out the troops."

"O. K.," the sheriff promised. "In three days you'll have Curly Torrence where you want him."

The sheriff heaved a tremendous sigh of relief when he saw the crowd scatter to their homes. Then he went to his office, flung himself down on a chair, and mopped the sweat from his face. And there he sat for a long time, reviewing the past.

For months, the Torrence gang, under the leadership of Jeb and "Curly" Torrence had centered its attention on Mirage, which lay in the foothills of the Panamint range. Robbery and bloodshed had accompanied each attack, and the sheriff's effort to apprehend the outlaws had met with disastrous results to the officer and his posse. The Torrence brothers seemed to possess a knowledge of the canyon-infested mountains that had enabled them not only to elude their pursuers, but to flank and dry-gulch them.

The third attempt, however, had been the most disastrous of all, although it had resulted in the capture of Curly Torrence, and to enter those mountain fastnesses seemed like inviting suicide. That was the reason why the sheriff had threatened to arrest any one who tried to collect a posse and take after the Torrence gang. He had experienced enough slaughter to last a lifetime, although it had in no wise affected his indomitable courage, and he had realized at last that attack by mass formation would never bring the outlaws to justice.

"Well, what's my next move?" he mused aloud. "I was a chump to

promise I'd hand Curly Torrence over to that mob in three days, but I had to do something to stop the lynching."

HIS trend of thought was interrupted by "Buck" Baker, the deputy he had left in charge of the town during his recent absence. They discussed the man hunt, and then the deputy remembered something.

"When you put Curly Torrence in the jug, did you notice Twister Green?" he asked.

"No, Buck," the sheriff replied. "What about him?"

"I had to jug him."

"Twister, huh? What's the matter with *him?*"

"Search me, sheriff. That's why I'm glad you're back. Mebbe you can figger him out. I done give up."

The sheriff passed a hand wearily across his eyes.

"Another problem, huh? Well, I s'pose one more load on my mind won't make much diff'rence, 'cause I'm half loco already. Gimme the low-down, Buck."

"Well," the deputy began, "you savvy how thick Twister and May Adams has been, don't you? Her old man, if you rec'lect, owns the Flyin' M outfit, and Twister busts broncs for him."

"Seems to me they was gonna get spliced, wasn't they, Buck?"

"Yeah—they *was,* sheriff. Anyhow, Twister comes into town two, three days ago, and gits loaded down with a cryin' jag. He tells everybody him and May had done quarreled, and that she'd told him to go chaw grass with the calves."

"Too bad," the sheriff observed.

"Then," the deputy went on, "Twister jerked out a gun and threatened to commit suicide; said life wasn't worth livin' without May. I grabbed his gun and kep' it, but that didn't do no good. Every time a cowpoke come into the saloon, the lovesick calf would cry out his troubles on their shoulders and then beg 'em for the loan of a gun. I got sorta scairt some of 'em would oblige, just to get rid of the pest, so I jugged him."

"Well, that don't offer no problem," the sheriff remarked, very much relieved. "He's cooled off by this, so go let him out."

"The devil it ain't no problem!" the deputy cried. "I did go to let him out, and the durned fool still wants to kill hisself."

The sheriff's fist came down on the desk with a bang, and the deputy jumped as if he'd been shot.

"Bring that young lad to me," the sheriff directed. "I'll put a stop to this nonsense. All he needs is a good bawling out by the right party. Bring him here."

Buck soon returned with his prisoner, and left the two men together at the sheriff's own suggestion. "Twister" Green still showed signs of his "bender" and his continual crying. He was a good-looking youth, with frank eyes and clear-cut features. And there was nothing of the dejected lover about his attitude. Instead, he fairly bristled with suppressed anger.

The sheriff cleared his throat impressively, and then regarded the youth severely. However, instead of cowering before the steady gaze, Twister's own eyes blazed back malignantly.

"Well, young man," the sheriff thundered, "what you gotta say for yoreself, huh? You want me to take you over my knee and paddle you good? What d'yer mean by disturbing the peace of Mirage—trying to commit suicide?"

"That's none of yore business,"

Twister snapped. "If I wanna croak myself, that's my affair, not yours. And I'm gonna do it, savvy? But don't you try no spankin', feller."

"Oh, so that's the way you feel about it, huh?" the sheriff sputtered, suddenly sitting erect on his chair and leveling a long, gnarled forefinger at him. "Well, I'm gonna make it my business, savvy? Don't you lemme ketch you committing suicide, or I'll——" The idiocy of that suddenly dawned upon him, and he took a different tack to save his dignity. "Just fancy a bright young feller like you talking about committing suicide jest 'cause a gal turns him down! They's lotsa gals still left, savvy?"

"Yeah, but none like May," Twister reminded him. "I ain't goin' to go on livin' without May. Besides, what d'you know about it, old fossil-face? You never was in love."

"Well, we won't go inta that now," the sheriff hedged. "Howsumever, I'll just call yore bluff. Here's my gun. Take it and go to the garbage dump and blow off yore head."

The youth reached far too eagerly for it, and the sheriff jerked it back just in time.

"So!" he exclaimed. "Buck was right. I guess you ain't bluffing, at that."

"You betcha life I ain't," Twister assured him. "You hand over that gun, you old Injun giver!"

The sheriff returned the gun to his holster, leaned back in his chair, and regarded Twister Green through half-closed eyes for such a long time that the cow-puncher began to squirm uneasily.

"Now, lemme git this straight ag'in," the sheriff said at last. "May Adams called the wedding off 'cause you and her had a lovers' last-minute scrap, and now nothing will do but you wanna end it all. In other words, you wanna blow out what you miscall yore brains. Is that it, Twister?"

"That's it—without the dirty crack," Twister replied.

"I see," the sheriff observed very thoughtfully. "Well, I've allus tried to oblige, and far be it from me to go back on my habits now. You're sure you wanna commit suicide, huh? Shooting off a finger or a toe, say, wouldn't satisfy you none?"

"Don't be an idjit, sheriff," Twister snorted. "Life's plumb empty for me from now on."

"I savvy. It's gotta be suicide or nothing, huh? Well, son, I think I can fix it so's you'll get yore wish. In fact, just to prove that I'm a good guy, I'll even help you. And, believe you me, Twister, if you do what I suggest, and you're still alive at the end of it, I'll—— Well, we'll skip that."

"And skip the kiddin', too," Twister sulkily protested.

Again the sheriff sat erect.

"You think I'm kidding, huh? All right, we'll just see. Pull up yore chair and lemme fill yore mule ears with an idee that's just come to me so's I can kill two birds with one stone, Twister. And you, you young walloper, is gonna be one of the birds. Now ain't I a real pal?"

"I'll answer that after you've spilled you're idee," Twister cautiously agreed. "But don't addle yore brains no more thinkin' up any more of them dirty cracks."

"All right, git ready to swoon, Twister. I'll promise to ketch you afore you hit the floor too hard."

"If they're anybody gonna pull a faint here, it'll be you, sheriff," Twister retorted, "and you'll hafta get somebody else besides me to

ketch you afore you hit the floor, savvy? Now what d'yer think of that?"

"Think?" the sheriff repeated, smiling. "Why, Twister, I think you're the suicidingest hombre I ever did see. And," he added a moment later, "you're the bravest, too. They say there ain't a fool like an old fool, but they got that saying twisted. Are you sartin sure you don't wanna back water?"

"You just hand over that gun, and you'll soon find out," Twister Green assured him impatiently.

INTO the sizzling Panamints rode Twister Green until the trail became too rough and he was obliged to check his horse to a mere crawl. Canyons, coulees, and dry washes, besides endless beds of huge boulders, appeared to have been scattered around indiscriminately by the hand of nature, and the conglomeration went to make up the south slope of the mountain range.

Twister rode like one who had a very definite purpose in view, and like one who knew just what he would do when he arrived at his destination. Sweat streamed off his brow into his eyes, and the motions he made to wipe them with the back of his hand was the only sign he gave that he was mindful of the fact that he really existed. The expression in his eyes was a total blank.

At last horse and rider entered the narrow mouth of a box canyon. It was dark inside, and looked inviting after the glare of the desert sun. And it was deep, too, with towering rock sides.

But instead of being cool, it was as hot as the inside of an oven. This narrow gash in the earth had been cut by a prehistoric current, which had flung itself angrily at the sides. Now, centuries later, the result of that mad and constant surge was to be seen in the contour of the canyon, which resembled a snake in agony. And because of these sharp turns in the solid rock, it was difficult for Twister to see twenty feet ahead.

As he rounded one of these bends, a lariat whistled through the air, settled about his shoulders, and he was jerked off his horse onto the flat of his back. When he shook the fog out of his brains, which had been caused by sudden contact with the hard floor of the canyon, he sat up and looked around.

Two men were quietly observing him, and both had him covered. They allowed him time to gain his feet and collect his scattered wits. Silently they searched him, and seemed surprised to find no weapon.

"Lost, kid?" one of them inquired.

"Not me," Twister replied. "I wanna see Jeb Torrence."

The two gunmen exchanged surprised and significant glances.

"How come you knowed where to find Jeb?" the man demanded.

"That's my business—and Jeb's," Twister snapped. "Better lead me to him or you'll be durned sorry."

The two men stared at him dumfounded, then moved off to one side and held a whispered conversation. Coming back to Twister, they ordered him to mount and ride slowly ahead.

Presently the canyon opened up on a natural amphitheater, flanked by towering rock walls. Saddle horses grazed about a spring that kept the grass lush. At the base of a rock wall, in the shade of an overhanging ledge, a dozen men lounged. They scrambled to their feet hurriedly when they caught sight of Twister Green.

There could be no mistaking Jeb Torrence. His very attitude suggested the leader. His face clouded as he listened to the report of his two men. With boring black eyes, he looked Twister over very thoroughly.

"Well, what you wanna see me about, feller?" he growled.

"I wanna join yore gang," Twister explained abruptly.

"Why?"

"That's my business. I've got a durned good reason, so don't worry."

JEB TORRENCE had killed men for even less back talk than that, and for a long moment his fingers gripped the butt of his gun until the knuckles turned white. Finally he withdrew his hand and gave a low, ugly laugh.

"You're a cowpoke, buddy, yet you ain't got no gun," he remarked. "That's kinda funny. You wanna join an outlaw band, and you come toddlin' along without even a knife. Something fishy somewhere, if you ask me."

"Fishy, me eye," Twister cried. "I ain't got a gun 'cause a wall-eyed dep'ty sheriff took it offn me and slammed me in the jug, and when the sheriff told him to lemme out, he hung onto it."

The outlaw leader thought that over for some time in silence, and then shook his head.

"No, I can't use you, feller," he said finally. "Come back some other time, and then mebbe I'll change my mind."

"You'll change it right now," Twister bristled.

"Yeah? And who said so?" Jeb inquired dangerously.

"Yore brother said so, savvy? And listen some more, feller: If you don't take me on, the mob at Mirage will drag Curly outta the jug and hang him."

The smile of indulgence vanished from Jeb Torrence's face, and he stared intently at Twister.

"That's diff'rent," he observed presently. "Now, s'pose you explain."

Twister complied, and by the time he neared the end of the recital, his voice held a note of excitement.

"He's a yaller skunk!" he cried, referring to the sheriff. "He's afraid of his job, and of you, and of the mob at Mirage. He's just runnin' a bluff—puttin' off the hangin' of Curly for three days. He knows durned well he dasent try to round you and yore gang up in the next three days, and that he'll hafta hand Curly over to the mob at the end of that time. He's just stallin'."

"Outside of the fact that the sheriff jugged you," Jeb inquired, still very suspicious of the newcomer, "what you got agin' the sheriff?"

"Plenty," Twister replied. "In the first place, I wasn't botherin' nobody when I was jugged. And in the second, when the sheriff come back with yore brother and jugged him, I asked him to lemme do something, and he turned me down; made a fool of me."

"What was it all about?"

"A gal; and I ain't gonna explain *that*."

The outlaw's eyelids opened slowly, and the expression of suspicion vanished.

"What did Curly have to say?" he demanded.

"He said for me to come out here and tell you to get a move on and spring him outta the jug. That's how I happened to know where to find you."

"Curly'll hafta keep his shirt on,"

Jeb said. "We was figgerin' on doin' that the day of the trial."

"You're fergittin' them three days' grace," Twister reminded him. "He won't never see the inside of a court."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," Jeb said with concern.

"Well, do I join the gang?" Twister asked. "I'm honin' for plenty of gunfire."

"I dunno," Jeb replied thoughtfully, hesitantly.

"Well, I do," Twister stated positively. "Take a look at this, and see if it don't make up yore mind for you. It's a key I made while I was in the jug. I was just gonna use it to bust out when the sheriff ups and kicks me out!"

"Why didn't you slip it to Curly, then?" Jeb interrogated sharply.

"I just told you why. I didn't have no chance to slip it to him. But here's the thing that'll spring Curly in less'n three days, if you hustle. And I'm goin' with you, 'cause I wanna put a slug through that yaller sheriff."

"All right, gimme that key," Jeb said. Then he turned to his men. "Boys," he sang out, "you heard what's been said. It's boot and saddle for us, pronto." Turning back to Twister, he added: "I'll be keepin' an eye on you, feller, so don't do nothin' funny."

SAVE for the barking of a dog and the tinkle of a piano in the saloon, Mirage appeared wrapped in slumber. Above the crest of the Panamints hovered the dying glow of the day, which dispelled the intense darkness of the night somewhat. The windows of the houses lining the single street were raised to permit the ingress of the cool air, but no lamplight shone from any of them.

Jeb Torrence and his band of outlaws entered the town as silently as ghosts, their horses' hoofs being wrapped in sacking to deaden the sound of their approach. At a given signal, the riders posted themselves at points along the street, with the exception of Jeb and Twister Green, who remained in front of the jail. Twister was holding the halter rope of a spare mount.

Jeb slipped from the saddle into the heavy dust of the street, and then darted into the shadow of the jail. There came the faint scratching of metal against metal, as he fitted the homemade key to the padlock, to be followed a few moments later by the protesting squeak of rusty hinges as the door opened.

Twister saw the dim figure of the leader disappear inside, and he held his breath until he saw him reappear with another figure, which he knew must be Curly Torrence.

Both men mounted hurriedly. Jeb then gave a low, distinct whistle. It was the prearranged signal for the band to leave their positions and gather around their leader.

"All set, boys?" Jeb inquired in a hoarse whisper.

"Yeah, all set, boss," came the quiet response.

"O. K., let's ride. I got Curly here."

As the bunched-up group of horsemen started to move away, Mirage suddenly sprang to life. From every window came spurts of stabbing flame, followed by the earsplitting reports of many rifles and six-guns. A withering hail of lead struck the outlaw band.

Men and horses went down in an extricable tangle, as if a tidal wave had hit them. The night was rendered hideous by the screams of wounded men and animals. That

anything at all could have remained alive after that first avalanche of lead seemed utterly impossible. Yet, out of that tangle of thrashing hoofs and human beings, men crawled on hands and knees, some to regain their feet, others to pitch forward into the dust as the shooting continued furiously.

Those on their feet were mowed down by the whistling lead. Then two more men crawled from the welter of slaughter. They were Jeb Torrence and Twister Green. Both gained their feet at the same moment, and both held drawn guns in their hands. But it was only when they collided in the dark that they recognized each other.

An oath split Jeb's lips, and his guns flicked upward.

"You double-crossin' snake!" he hissed, and fired.

But the pressure on the trigger had been only the spasmodic action of nerves that answered to the thrust of bullets through the brain and heart as the concealed marksmen picked him off. Twister held his fire and watched the leader sink to his knees and then into the dust.

Instantly the firing ceased, and men poured out of the house, yelling and shouting at the top of their voices. They threw themselves on those outlaws who were still alive though badly wounded, and wrenched the guns out of their hands.

"Did Curly get his?" the sheriff asked, running up.

"I'll say he did," some one answered. "I made sure of him right off the bat."

"All right, boys," the sheriff said. "I gave you my word I'd hand Curly over to you, and that's what I've done. According to the law, he died trying to escape. Now, get this here street cleaned up afore daylight. And you, Twister, I wanna see you in my office."

When they arrived there, the sheriff lighted the lamp, and then turned to the cowpoke with a wide grin on his face.

"I see you're still alive," he observed.

"Yeah, worse luck," Twister said dolefully. "I carried out yore plan, figgerin', same as you did, that I'd get mine and be able to fergit May. But I shore played outta luck, like I allus do."

"Well, don't start crying about it," the sheriff said. "You're a hero now, feller. You helped me fool that gang and wipe 'em out, and you'll get some fat rewards for it. That'll fix it so's you can buy a ranch and be yore own boss."

"Yeah, and without May," Twister observed sorrowfully. "No, sheriff, I don't want no ranch nor no nothin', unless May goes with it, and there ain't a chance of that now."

Some one started pounding loudly on the office door, and a girl's voice was heard in frantic appeal.

"Sheriff, sheriff! Is he all right? Is he alive? Oh, do open this door, sheriff!"

Twister's head went up like a startled deer's, and his eyes glowed in the lamplight as he stood staring at the door.

"That—that's May, sheriff!" he exclaimed.

"Sure it's May." The sheriff smiled wistfully. "What d'yer think I've been doing for you while you've been away doing things for me? I was in love myself, Twister, and lost a darned good gal 'cause I couldn't control my temper. Now, open that door and let her in and me out. I never could abide the sight of two lovers making up, anyhow. It's too mushy."

WOLVERENE GHOST

By KENNETH GILBERT

Author of "Goliath of the West," etc.

HAD Jim Garrett listened to the earnest advice of the Tahltans and breeds, he would not have been here now—but Jim Garrett was not likely to have his judgment swayed by the superstitious beliefs of Indians. Almost everything they did was based upon care not to offend the Unseen People. Yet here he was in a *mesatchie* spot, where no Indian would go, even though it was one of the richest fur pockets in the North. And—so he vowed over and over, but with lessening vehemence—he was going to stay. There was no such thing as a ghost, he told himself, although there might be something in a curse laid upon a man by an enemy. And that giant, "Wolf" Borson, who had once been Jim Garrett's partner, probably had cursed him with dying breath. If so, then the curse was working, for there were many mysterious things about this spot; things which ordinary reason and common sense could not explain. Nevertheless, Jim Garrett was going to stay, for the purpose of proving what he had always believed, that he was a better man than Wolf Borson, and if that were true, then certainly he had no cause to fear the evil spirits who kept the Tahltans out of this *mesatchie* land.

For there could be no ghost of the *tamanawos* world equal to Wolf Borson, when the latter was aroused. If dead now, his power must be weakened or gone utterly, and Garrett had never been afraid of him while alive.

YET as Garrett plodded along on snowshoes over one leg of his hundred-mile trap line, he could not wholly free himself of uneasiness. New snow had fallen during the night, and the rackets on his feet made soft, whispering sounds as he moved steadily forward. The lofty peaks all about, their craggy summits glittering like alabaster crystals; the spirelike spruces, drooping forlornly under the weight of wet snow; the bleak, rugged landscape with upthrust boulders each the size of a cabin—all this he saw and it did not depress him. What he did not like now was the utter, ominous silence. And yet he had been a man who had never been aware of how awesomely still a winter wilderness can be.

Was Wolf Borson really dead? Jim Garrett believed so, and yet he had the feeling that the man lived, even though that seemed impossible, for each knew it was a battle to the death, that day on the Upper Skygak when they fought it out with smoking guns. Garrett had felt the smashing impact of Wolf Borson's bullet, and had been whirled half around. But as he did so, Garrett saw Borson pitch forward, and knew that his own bullet had likewise reached its mark. Then had come merciful unconsciousness, and Garrett had awakened in Joe Dulac's cabin.

For some reason which he could not explain, he did not tell Dulac the truth of that bullet wound in the shoulder. Wolf Borson had been crazy drunk that day, and they had fought over Marie Dulac. Jim Garrett and Marie had planned to marry in the spring. But Wolf Borson, stirred by jealousy, and, perhaps, the prospects of losing his partner, had interfered. When Garrett had come along, he had found Marie in tears, and old Joe Dulac was nursing a swollen jaw, where Wolf Borson's heavy fist had landed. Borson was gone.

But Garrett had trailed him, and when he had overtaken the other, they fought. But for the fact that Joe Dulac had stumbled over his body in the blizzard that swept down upon the land before Garrett could regain consciousness, the latter would have died. Joe Dulac had said nothing about Wolf Borson, so Garrett assumed that Dulac had not seen the other.

"I stumbled and fell," Garrett explained to Dulac. "My gun went off accidentally." Garrett suspected that Dulac didn't believe that, but no other explanation was given. At least thirty-six hours had passed since the fight. Wolf Borson had probably frozen to death. Later, however, Garrett wished that he had told Dulac the truth, so that the man might have searched for Borson. For there could have been hope of his being found alive, and Garrett, although he was bitter against the man, did not really wish him dead. But it was too late now.

When Garrett recovered, he searched for Borson's body, but did not find it. But this was not wholly significant, for the wolves could have discovered it ahead of him, and there had been three heavy falls of snow. Borson was gone, but when or where, there was no telling. Difficulty lay in the fact that Garrett feared he might not be able to convince people that the duel was jus-

tified. They would be more likely to believe that Garrett had murdered his partner, even though Borson was regarded as a dangerous man.

Already, doubt had risen in the mind of Marie Dulac.

"Jim," she had asked, "what has become of Wolf?"

And Garrett had replied truthfully enough: "I don't know."

That did not satisfy her, and even when he told her of his plans, of how he was going to make a big catch of fur that winter, so that they could be married in the spring, she did not respond enthusiastically. At last, she spoke directly of what was troubling her.

"They are saying, those people at the settlement, that you killed Wolf Borson," she told Garrett. "I do not believe that, Jim. But I must know the truth. If we are going to be happy together, I cannot have people saying that you murdered your partner."

Garrett did tell her, then, of what had happened, but bound her to secrecy. "You see, Marie," he explained, "I do not know what became of him. If I killed him, I did it in self-defense. But how can I prove that now?"

She shook her head.

"You must find him, dead or alive, Jim," she said decidedly.

"But how can I find him?" he protested. "The wolves may not have left a trace of him. Or he may be alive, and have left the country. For a long time he spoke of us going on a prospecting trip beyond Mentasta Pass, but when I told him that I was going to marry you and break up the partnership, he never spoke of going prospecting again.

"Forget him, Marie. He's gone, dead or alive. We'll never see him again!"

But the girl was not convinced.

"Wolf Borson was in some respects like a wolverene," she declared. "I would never be happy, Jim, unless his disappearance was explained, and your name cleared."

"You mean you won't marry me until I find Wolf Borson?"

She nodded assent, although her eyes were misty. Garrett was hurt, angry.

"All right," he said shortly. "And —good-by! I'm going trapping in the Cultus country. I haven't time to look for a ghost. Got to make some money for myself. I'll be back next spring, and maybe then you'll have changed your mind!"

"I won't change, Jim. If you don't find him, it would be better if you did not come back. By spring, everybody will believe that you killed him, for some reason of your own.

"Anyway, if you go into the Cultus country, probably you won't come back, either. No Indian will go into that place!"

Garrett laughed.

"But I'm not an Indian," he assured her. "I'm not afraid of spooks. The Indians have left that country alone, while it's too far for the average white trapper. There should be plenty of fur there. I'm going in—and I'll come back!"

HE left her then, and set out. There was snow on the higher peaks when he succeeded in poling in the last of his outfit. He had plenty of grub, plenty of traps, and he built himself three good cabins, one at the end of each leg of his trap line. He killed moose and mountain sheep, and hung up their carcasses at each cabin, beyond the reach of prowling beasts. Everything was in order

when the first heavy snow came, and he could begin trapping.

For three weeks all went well, and his scorn of fearful Indians who had scrupulously left this country alone grew apace. Never had he seen so much fur congregated in one spot. There was an abundance of mink and marten, and foxes, too, and it would be strange if, during the winter, he did not take a number of silver-black fox pelts. Everywhere he saw the tracks of rabbits, and he knew by this sign that the fur bearers, who depended for food upon the rabbits, would remain here. The snow deepened, but he had good cabins in which to spend the night no matter at which leg of the trap line he was when darkness came; there was plenty of food, and his luck held. Almost he had forgotten the memory of Wolf Borson, when the thing happened.

Before dawn he set out to make the rounds of his traps, confident that he had made a good catch since he saw them last. And he discovered that nearly every one of his cunningly concealed traps had taken toll. But the animals which had been caught were now gone. He muttered when he discovered in one trap the dark paw of a silver-black fox. No telling how many hundreds of dollars that pelt would have been worth—but no fox was there.

At least six inches of snow had fallen since he had last come this way, and he could not make out clearly what had happened. But a dread suspicion was already forming in his mind. Had a "bad" wolverene, a cunning carcajou devil, moved into the Cultus country, to plague and drive him away?

Wolverenes, thanks to a kind Providence, were not plentiful, and not all of them are "bad." Garrett remembered what an old Tahltan had once said, in explaining this fact.

According to the Indian, a great medicine man, Na-bar-tar-zhon, had long ago made a pact with the wolverene clan. He visited the cave where all of them lived at that time, according to the Indian legend, and prevailed upon them to make peace with the Indians. But one member of the tribe was not present at that council, and when he returned and heard of the armistice that had been declared, he was angry. This wolverene, so the story ran, vowed he would never live at peace with mankind, and to this day the "bad" wolverenes are the descendants of the old outlaw.

But it was not until Garrett reached the next cabin that night that he realized he was in for grim war. For the place had been pillaged, and his grub destroyed!

Moreover, it had been done by a beast of super strength. Wolverenes are the strongest animals of their size in the world, but this one evidently was a veritable Hercules of its kind. In an upper corner of the cabin was a log which had not been locked in place, and this had been torn out as though by a grizzly bear. Gaining access to the place through the hole thus formed, the wolverene had done its best to wreck the place.

Boxes were torn open by strong, savage jaws; precious articles such as flour, sugar, and coffee were spilled on the dirt floor. The cabin was rank with the musky odor of the defiler.

THEN and there Garrett resolved on revenge. He would not attempt to run his trap line farther until he had caught the wolverene. He took his spare traps at the cabin and began stringing them along the trap line in cunning

fashion. It was useless to bait them; he would have to chance on the wolverene blundering into them. Sooner or later the animal would be following his trail.

The second cabin, being more strongly built, had escaped the destroyer, but when he reached the third, he found that his meat cache had been rifled.

Again he swung over his trap line, hoping to find that the grizzled devil had made a misstep. But, to his astonishment, he discovered that most of the traps he had set, were gone. The wolverene had smelled them out, cleverly sprung them, and then packed them away to a hiding place.

Garrett began to get worried. This wolverene was displaying a craftiness far greater than any he had ever heard of before. The situation was growing serious. At the end of the week, Garrett had not only lost a lot of precious time, valuable grub, and furs, but had been outwitted at every turn.

Fortunately, he thought, he had brought along poison, for the purpose of taking wolves. He made up a number of pellets of moose tallow, with a deadly dose of strychnine in the center, shaping the tiny balls by means of a stick and not touching them with his hands. Still trying to keep the man smell from them, he laid them out on a platter of birch bark, then moved down one leg of the trap line, scattering them in the snow. The greedy wolverene would be certain to find them.

And that, Garrett discovered next morning, was what happened. But the wolverene would touch none of the death pills. Instead, it ferreted them out, and scuffed neat piles of snow over them, so that other animals passing that way might be warned. Or so it seemed.

Garrett went about his work now with a frown creasing his brow. He determined to make an effort of a different sort. He had a spare rifle with him, and likewise his own favorite carbine. These weapons he rigged into set guns, so that anything moving along the trail would trip on a stick seemingly stuck in the snow carelessly, and pull the triggers. The rifles were set back from the trail, but pointed in such fashion that their cross fire could not miss. Hopefully, then, he went to bed that night, and at daylight was out to see what had happened.

What he did see made him fairly sick. The wolverene had located the set guns and, as though understanding perfectly the significance of them, had managed to explode one without being hurt itself. Moreover, in being discharged, the gun's muzzle had fallen into the snow, and with the barrel partly filled, the explosion had ruined the weapon. The other weapon had vanished. Undoubtedly the wolverene had touched it off as it had done the other and then, knowing it was harmless, had carried it off and hidden it. Garrett had heard stories in the North of such things happening, but not until now had he believed them to be other than the fanciful yarns of old trappers.

The man realized now, that with many of his traps stolen, the rifles gone, and his supply of grub running low, he was on the verge of defeat. Moreover, the thing had begun to prey on his mind until his imagination was ready to accept weird explanations for what had happened. Again and again he was tormented by thoughts of Wolf Borson. He was reminded, too, of what the Indians had said about the Cultus country being an accursed place. Certainly there must be

something to the superstition if this land could produce a beast of such cunning as this fiendish wolverene. Garrett began to think that it would be well to get out while the getting was good.

YET where could he go? He had boasted to Marie Dulac that he would be back in the spring with a fine catch of furs which would give them enough money to marry. Now, it seemed, he was foredoomed to return as a beaten man. Already she had told him that she would not marry him unless he cleared his name of the mystery of Wolf Borson's disappearance, yet he had counted upon changing her mind. But if he returned penniless, not only having failed to find Borson, but to make a big fur catch as well, he doubted if she would have anything more to do with him, for Marie Dulac was a pretty girl, and could have her pick of many suitors.

"I'm going to stay," he vowed, "until I get that devil, or he gets me!" Yet even then he felt that it was a vainglorious boast. Already he had been outwitted at every turn, and there was little likelihood of his being able to devise some plan of killing the beast which would prove successful.

His grub was low, but he still had his six-gun and a knife, although his rifles were gone. There was still some meat left in one cache, and he felt that he could hold out for perhaps a couple of weeks longer. He gathered up all his traps and reset them along the trail in groups of three or four. Thereafter, he began making daily rounds, but without success. Either the wolverene scorned to go near the traps at all, or dug them up, sprung them, and carried some of them away. It was then that the big blizzard came.

Garrett had expected it for some time, and had he not been cursed by the wolverene, he would have been well fortified against the storm. But now the blow held him in a cabin at the far end of the trap line. Fortunately it was one where there still remained some food.

Day after day the storm roared, and Garrett waited with growing uneasiness. His food was practically gone, and so was his supply of wood; and still the blow continued. He awoke on the fifth day with the realization that the climax had come.

But now he heard no wind whistling around the eaves, or the patter of icy particles against the door, like handfuls of thrown shot. The storm was over, but another ordeal lay ahead of him. Without leaving the cabin, he knew that the weather had turned bitterly cold. His food was gone, and he had no weapon save the six-gun with which to get meat; and he had to get out of the country. But he still had his snowshoes and sleeping bag. By pushing through at top speed, and maybe picking up a grouse or rabbit on the way, he might make it back to civilization. But he had little heart left, for it seemed that he had lost everything. In his state of mind, it was logical to ascribe reasons for this condition, and he was ready to acknowledge that there might be deeper and more occult things which the Indians understood but of which he was unaware. Certainly, there was potency in the curse which Wolf Borson had placed upon him. If there was such a thing as a ghost, then this devilish wolverene was the reincarnation of his enemy. It was proof, he argued, that Wolf Borson was actually dead. All he asked now, he told himself, was an opportunity to be avenged.

And that opportunity was given him before dark of the day he left camp.

As he pushed through a birch thicket which made the going hard because his snowshoes became entangled, he was suddenly aware of a shape moving perhaps fifty yards ahead of him. It was traveling rapidly, yet furtively. To his astonishment he recognized the wolverene!

THERE could be no doubt that this was the fiend which had been plaguing him, for it was the biggest and most grizzled he had ever seen. As it started uphill, he could make out the faint silver diamond pattern on its back. Just in time, he remembered the six-gun beneath his parka.

He stopped, whipped out the weapon, and concentrated all his faculties in taking aim. As the gun spoke, he cried out in delight, for the wolverene lunged into the snow. A hit! Again and gain he shot, but he was missing now, for he could see the bullets kicking up snow all about the beast lying there.

Suddenly, however, the wolverene came alive. It raised itself, snarled defiance at him, and began running. He sent shot after shot at it, before the hammer clicked on an empty chamber. The wolverene disappeared in the brush.

Garrett's fingers groped through his pockets as he sought to reload. Then he made the discovery that he had no more cartridges. He had brought in two boxes of them, and had not fired but a few rounds all winter, until now. He tried to recall what had become of them, but failed. They had been left behind at one of the three cabins, and he could not remember which. In his rage he had the temptation to throw the gun away, but instead shoved it back into the holster. Nevertheless, he knew that the wolverene had been hit, and as he came up to the spot where the thing had been lying, he saw a splotch of blood on the snow.

The discovery fixed his determination. He would trail the beast down until he came upon it dead. At the same time he realized that wolverenes have a peculiar tenacity as regards life, and will make amazing recoveries from wounds. Still, the opportunity was not to be missed. If he could take the pelt of this killer, it would make up in a measure for all the hard luck he had suffered.

It was not difficult to follow the track, for the short-legged animal made a veritable trough in the snow as it galloped ahead. Now and then he saw further traces of blood. It seemed to him, too, that the leaps of the wolverene were growing shorter, indicating that it was tiring, or was becoming weaker.

And, just before sundown, with the dying rays of the orb lengthening into reddish stains on the snow, he reached the end of his quest.

He found that he was following one leg of his trap line, as though it were a trail to which the wolverene turned instinctively, having followed it many times before. The tracks of the beast led into the depths of a spruce thicket. He was on the point of entering, when a blood-chilling snarl stopped him. Less than a dozen paces away was the wolverene—three of its legs caught in traps which Garrett had set there weeks ago, and which he had abandoned on his flight for civilization!

There was no chance for the enemy to escape. The wooden clogs of the three traps were too heavy for the beast to drag. But now, held

fast, it was ready to put up a battle before it died. Its greenish eyes blazed hatred, and again it snarled, baring its long fighting fangs.

Garrett cried out in triumph. The terrible mental ordeal he had undergone had created fantasies in his mind. Before him, he saw not merely an animal whose hatred of mankind is paralleled only by its crafty vindictiveness, but the living embodiment of a creature which had laid a curse on him. Here was the ghost of Wolf Borson!

Seized with the idea, Garrett seemed to see a strong resemblance in the snarling, hideous, fighting mask of the wolverene, and the bearded, contorted face of the partner who had turned against him.

"I got you, Wolf!" he cried. "I was always a better man than yourself. I've proved it before. Now I'm going to prove it again. I'm going to put you where you'll never trouble me again, Wolf! If I killed your body in fair fight once, I'll kill your ghost now, also in fair fight!"

HE tossed off his pack, removed his snowshoes, and moved closer, shoulders hunched forward, arms wide apart, and hands, palms upward, ready to clutch and hold in a death grip. As he came closer, he saw where his bullet had struck. It had merely creased the weaselike head, slanting, above the eyes. The wound was still raw and bleeding. Garrett's gaze held it.

"I put my mark on you, Wolf!" he muttered.

But of a sudden he stopped, as common sense came to the rescue. He had no weapon now save his knife, for the six-shooter was empty. At the same time it would be folly to come to bare-hand grips with a beast which had the courage and ferocity to attack animals twice its size.

"You've got fangs, Wolf, and I've got a knife. We're fairly matched." Even then, however, he slipped off his parka and, winding its thick folds around his left hand and wrist, he drew the knife. He didn't want the beast to die too easily; he wanted to be fair, even with Wolf Borson.

All this time the purring snarl of the wolverene continued, as it watched the man. There was no fear in the blazing eyes of the savage creature, which was nearly the size of a dog, and four times more dangerous; there was only cold, studied calculation as it regarded the man, for the wolverene seemed to understand what was about to happen, that this was to be a hand-to-hand fight. With his parka-wrapped arm upraised, his knife set point foremost, Garrett advanced. The wolverene crouched, gathering its strength for the leap. Suddenly the thing sprang, dragging the traps to the length of their chains.

Only for the fact that the traps were heavy, the wolverene might have reached the man's throat then, for its attack was swift and unexpected. But Garrett threw up his left arm protectingly, and at the same time lunged with the knife. The knife went true, but at the same time the fierce fangs and claws of the wolverene tore the thick, tough wolf-hide parka. It seemed not to mind the wound Garrett had inflicted, but kept lunging at him, pressing him backward. Savagely as a beast, Garrett fought, and as craftily. He knew that should he slip and go down in the snow, nothing could save him.

The endurance of the wolverene was an incredible thing. Likewise, it was actuated by its hate of the man on whom it had declared war.

Its strength was almost unbelievable, and Garrett knew that if it were not a captive, it would kill him quickly, no matter how well he was armed. As the thing stood, the odds were even, man against beast, and the weapons of one were offset. It was no unequal combat of a man trying to kill a helpless creature; the wolverene was already proving itself a match for the man.

Back and forth they battled, the man silent, the wolverene voicing its battle pæan of hate and ferocity. The snow became stained and broken. Garrett had once heard of a wolverene killing a full-grown wolf, even though it lost its own life in the struggle. He had not believed the story then, but he could believe it now.

But he was battling no ordinary specimen of its clan; he was fighting the fear which had dogged him all these weary weeks. He was fighting more than that; he was fighting, so his highly excited and impressionable mind believed, the ghost of Wolf Borson. In every snarl twist of the wolverene's lips, he seemed to see the triumphant grimace of the man he had killed in defense of his own life.

Minutes passed swiftly. Garrett felt himself tiring. He could have withdrawn, but that would be an admission of weakness which was unendurable. "I'll hold out as long as you can, Wolf Borson!" he panted. "I'll prove again that I'm the better of us!"

Again and again he returned to the attack, guarding always against those deadly rushes which almost carried him off his feet. The parka was now ripped to shreds; he was wounded in a dozen places where the wolverene's fangs or catlike claws had counted coup. But the wolverene was also wounded; it should be dead, by all odds, yet Garrett knew that the ghost of Wolf Borson would not die easily. And then, abruptly, the battle ended even as it had begun.

For, of the two, the wolverene was not only the more ferocious but the craftier fighter. In its time it had probably killed many animals larger than itself—great lynxes, surly bobcats. No doubt it had even driven many a black bear from meat, and had possibly snarled defiance at a grizzly. In its cunning now, it must have realized that it was losing the fight, and therefore must fall back upon guile. As it ended its last lunge at the man, in which the two of them came together in one brief, horrible moment, it fell on its side as though dying. With a hoarse cry, the man leaped forward, for the final blow.

But ere the knife could descend, and while Garrett was off guard, the wolverene came up from beneath, fangs slashing, claws working. It gashed Garrett deeply, but luck was with him even then. The wolverene's legs became entangled in a trap chain. Before it could free itself, he struck twice, heavily, then threw himself aside.

Yet the wolverene put forth everything in one last effort. It leaped on him, biting and clawing. And so, as consciousness drained from the man's brain, he was floundering there in the snow, still slashing, still fighting. Then blackness came.

BUT the faint apparently lasted only a few moments. It seemed that a dreadful transfiguration had taken place. Half-crazed as he was, it appeared to Garrett that the wolverene changed form, and became Wolf Borson. And Garrett, still battling, awoke,

to find himself locked in the grip of strong arms.

He could see the face of Wolf Borson held close to his. Yet there was no demoniac expression in the countenance of his former partner; rather there was concern, worry.

"Easy, now, Jim!" he heard Borson's voice saying. "Easy, now! I'm not going to hurt you!"

Amazed, Garrett ceased struggling, and rested there, all but exhausted, in his partner's arms. But there was alarm in his own eyes—alarm and disbelief. Wonderingly he stared at the other. This was Wolf Borson, and yet the man was not wounded.

"I've killed you, Wolf," breathed Garrett hoarsely at last. "I killed you once back there on the Skygak, and just now I killed you again. But—you're not even hurt!"

The big man smiled. There was no murder lust in his eyes such as Garrett had seen that day they had fought over Marie Dulac. Instead, was the look such as he had seen in the old days.

"You didn't fight me just now, Jim," explained the other. "I came up just in time to pull a wolverene off you. It was nearly dead, but there might have been some harm in it yet. You'd ripped it to ribbons with your knife!"

But Garrett was not convinced.

"You're lying to me," he charged. "Why, there's the same mark on your forehead where I creased you—while you were in that wolverene's form. You're a ghost, Wolf Borson; you can't trick me again!"

The big man grinned and stood up.

"No ghost, Jim," he assured the other. "Although I might have been if Joe Dulac had not found me the same day that he found you! He was ready to finish killing me, after beating him up as I did when I was drunk. But when I learned that he had also found you—and I told him where to look—I gave him half of a poke of gold to keep quiet about me. I wanted you to think that I was dead, that you'd killed me. Joe kept quiet; he didn't even tell his daughter, Marie. So it gave me a chance to go prospecting on my own accord.

"As for this wound"—he touched the place on his forehead—"that's where you creased me all right. But I was never a wolverene. Joe hid me out in his meat cache overnight, until I could travel. When I found what I wanted, I came back—to find you and share it with you in repayment for the harm I'd done you, Jim!

"You're free now. I came on as soon as I could, and as soon as I found where you'd gone. I've got a good outfit here, and we'll hit over beyond Mentasta, where I told you I'd always wanted to go. I found a creek there, Jim, where you can pick up nuggets like pebbles!"

Still dazed, and unable to comprehend it all, Jim shook his head.

"I made a promise to Marie," he replied. "I told her I'd be back next spring, to claim her. She made the condition that I clear my name over your supposed death."

Again Borson grinned.

"Don't worry about Marie," he told Garrett. "That was her way of getting rid of you. She thought you'd killed me, and that you'd never be able to make good. So she married Pete Fontaine a week after you left. We quarreled over nothing."

And, oddly enough for a man who has just been told that he has lost his girl, but has laid a ghost and regained a partner of years' standing, Jim Garrett smiled.

LEAD JUSTICE

By GEORGE ALLAN MOFFATT

SHERIFF TAFFER'S old face was as cracked and as bronzed as the sun-baked desert. His eyes were blue, as keen as a mountain eagle's. He had a funny habit of smiling when he was worried.

He was smiling at "Quirt" Peters, his deputy, as Quirt sat in the sheriff's office at Pinto City. Quirt was a tall hombre, with a coal-black shirt, a sombrero that cost a month's salary, expensive boots, and nickel-plated spurs, and around his wrist was a leather quirt, the luxury that had given him his nickname at the Tall Bar Saloon.

But Quirt was a good deputy, a riding young fool that didn't know the word fear. He dressed like a dude and fought like a wild cat. And Sheriff Taffer looked on him as he would his own son.

"Quirt," he said, "it ain't common sense, you riding into Devil's Valley alone after Red Brogan and his gang of rustlers. We'll take the boys and go in with force enough to blow them hills to hell."

"And you won't get any more than some desert dust in your throat," Quirt answered. "Brogan is hiding them steers missing from Circle T in Devil's Valley, and I'm sneaking in there to-day on a hunch I got, and if I don't come out alive, you'll know that Red Brogan can shoot a split second faster than I can."

Sheriff Taffer shook his head wearily.

"Red Brogan will shoot from am-

bush," he said. "You won't have a chance. You can't fight desert rats like Brogan alone."

QUIRT PETERS laughed, strode out of the office into the scorching sun of the afternoon, his polished spurs rattling and the quirt swinging from his wrist. The main street of Pinto was almost deserted. A couple of waddies stood in front of the Tall Bar Saloon, and a rider was leaving town to the south.

"So long, sheriff," Quirt yelled, as he leaped on his sorrel. "I'm playing the part of a detective and if Brogan gets me, I'll get the info to you in some way. Look for——"

A couple of strangers came around the corner of the store next to the sheriff's office. They were within earshot of Quirt Peters, and he stopped the sentence abruptly.

"Look for a couple hunks of lead," he corrected his unfinished sentence, his eyes on the two strangers. "They might tell you a whole lot."

With that his horse took him out of the town in a cloud of dust.

Sheriff Taffer stood in the door of the wooden building that housed his office, his face worried. Jim Feathers, the mayor of Pinto City, and a close friend of the sheriff, came across the street.

"What's the young fool up to now?" Feathers asked.

"He's going to get killed, Jim," the sheriff said hoarsely, "and there ain't a thing I can do to stop the young hellion. He's going into Devil's Valley to get the goods on Red Brogan and those missing steers of Circle T. He has some lead but he won't tell me."

Jim Feathers's mouth gaped open, but he didn't say anything. The name of "Red" Brogan usually brought only silence in Pinto City. Brogan was the head of a gang of rustlers that had been working the country for over a year. But Brogan wasn't in jail or even headed that way.

He came to town every night or so from his so-called ranch in Devil's Valley. He strutted around with the cocky air of a man that knew he had the law fooled. Sheriff Taffer had tried every trick he knew from his long experience to trap Brogan and his gang, but cattle disappeared and Brogan walked the streets of Pinto City free from the arm of the law.

Brogan was as quick and as deadly as a rattlesnake with the two six-guns at his side, and there weren't many men in the Tall Bar Saloon who cared to mix words with him. There were ugly stories told about his ranch in Devil's Valley, and somewhere in that valley two deputies of Sheriff Taffer had been found with bullets in their backs.

But Red Brogan shot from ambush and he didn't leave any clews and he came to town without fear of being molested by the law. Quirt Peters had taken a strong interest in Red Brogan's rustling activities, and Quirt usually worked alone. He had been in Devil's Valley twice. He found enough to give him a hot trail and when he left Sheriff Taffer with his words about the two chunks of lead, he was going to follow this lead, whatever it was.

"Dang the yapping young coyote," Jim Feathers finally gasped. "He won't live two hours in Devil's Valley with Red Brogan knowing he's on a hot trail. We better get the boys together and follow him."

Sheriff Taffer shook his head.

"The boy wants to work this lead alone," he said. "If he doesn't come back by to-morrow afternoon, the boys can go in after him."

EARLY in the afternoon of the next day, a posse from Pinto City went into Devil's Valley looking for Quirt Peters. They found his bullet-riddled body alongside a cactus bush, with his sorrel horse standing over him, refusing to move until the body of the dead deputy was carried into Pinto City.

Sheriff Taffer was in his office when the body was brought in and laid on the old couch. The face of the sheriff paled a little, and his eyes grew suddenly cold and bitter as he looked down at the body of the young man he had learned to look on as a son.

In death Peters still wore the black shirt, the decorated boots, and the flashing spurs. His expensive sombrero, found near his body, lay on the couch with him. His face was an ashen gray, but he had died as he had lived, with the trace of a grin on his lips.

A bullet had hit him from the rear, plowing through his body near the heart. Death had been sudden, and he had fallen from his horse hardly knowing that he was hit.

The old sheriff stood over him, his blue eyes looking at the body from head to foot.

"Brogan got the kid," Jim Feathers said. "Got him in the back as he does most men he kills."

"You found him at the edge of the valley," Sheriff Taffer said hoarsely. "He was on his way home."

"He was at the edge of the desert," Feathers agreed, "and he hadn't been dead very long because his body was still limp."

The muscles of the sheriff's thin mouth contracted, and little lumps quivered on his jaws.

"He was coming back to town," the sheriff repeated. "I guess he found what he was looking for, or Brogan wouldn't have killed him."

Jim Feathers said nothing. The men standing in the little office, the members of the posse, stared at the sheriff silently. The sheriff knelt down, slipping his hands in the pockets of the dead man's clothes. He stood up suddenly. In his hand were two chunks of lead. They were long, without any general shape, each weighing six or seven ounces. The sheriff gazed at them, his eyes narrowing strangely.

"Look for a couple of hunks of lead," he remembered the words of Quirt. "They might tell you a whole lot."

Jim Feathers asked: "What's them hunks of lead?"

The sheriff smiled wearily.

"I'm trying to figure it out," he said. "Quirt's last words were to look for two hunks of lead if anything happened. Damn funny. There ain't nothing on them."

Taffer turned the pieces over. They were polished from long use, but on them was not even a scratch. He tapped them on a table. They were not hollow. He took his knife and cut into the soft metal. He found nothing.

"A couple of hunks of lead," the sheriff repeated. "They might tell you a whole lot. It's all Greek to me. Danged if I can see anything to them. If them strangers hadn't appeared as Quirt started to tell me more, we might know something. But they don't tell me a thing."

The men in the room looked at the lead, shook their heads. Jim Feathers had several suggestions, but none of them carried any sense.

Suddenly Sheriff Taffer stiffened. His eyes darted over the body of the dead man. Then a grim smile came to his face.

"I guess they might tell a whole lot," he said. "And I'm going alone to find out what they tell."

"You ain't letting that skunk ambush you, sheriff," Jim Feathers said. "Not as long as I can ride a horse."

"Listen, Jim," the sheriff said; "Quirt had nerve enough to go alone, and there was reason why he wanted to go that way. I'm going back to where he was killed and for a good reason I'm going alone. After I look over the ground where you found the body, I may call on Red Brogan and when I call, I'm making the call alone."

Jim Feathers growled something under his breath. Sheriff Taffer walked out of his office, down the street to where his horse was tied to the hitch post. With a wave of his hand he leaped on his horse and disappeared down the street.

DEVIL'S VALLEY lay to the west of Pinto City, a vast, desolate canyon of sun-baked earth and shifting sands. A few cactus grew in this wilderness of heat and sand dunes. Sun-bleached rocks rose out of the earth, standing like grim, stark tombstones over the death in Devil's Valley. Deep gullies and ravines broke through the brown, lifeless earth, the hiding places of bandits and rustlers for a quarter of a century.

In this valley Sheriff Taffer rode. His face was drawn and pale. From time to time he wet his parched lips. His body seemed to slump a little, the blow of Quirt's death having brought age on him suddenly. His right hand rested on the six-gun in his holster, the gun that had spat death for many years with a speed faster than the eye.

He followed the main trail until he came to the place where the body of Quirt Peters had been found. It was at a sharp turn in the trail, with a rocky cliff of bleached stones rising to the left.

Sheriff Taffer leaped off his horse and studied the earth around the cactus bush that had partly hidden Peters. The imprint of the body was still in the sand. A pool of blood had caked a purple-black in the scorching sun.

Taffer studied the ground closely, walking around the spot in a circle. Then he went up to the rocky cliff, climbing over the jagged rocks until he came to a small mesa at their top. A long rock jutted out of this plateau.

Behind the rock Taffer found an empty .30-30 cartridge. He picked it up, smiled coldly. The killer had stood behind that rock as he had fired the shot that had killed Peters. After looking down at the trail for a moment, the sheriff went back to his horse.

Here he pulled the two large chunks of lead out of his pocket, looked at them grimly, saying to himself: "You were right, Quirt. These hunks of lead will tell a whole lot before I'm through with Red Brogan."

Then he jumped on his horse, turned it onto the trail again, and started into Devil's Valley where death awaited him every turn in the road. He followed the trail for over a mile. After that he turned off it, sending his horse down a deep ravine. It was a mile long. At the far end the sheriff jumped to the ground, let the reins fall from the bridle, and started for the top of the ravine.

Fifteen minutes later he crawled to the summit of a hill that overlooked a small valley nestling in the barren and desolate region. A few saplings grew at the edge of the valley, and two tall cottonwood trees towered high in the center.

Around these cottonwoods were several rambling buildings, a corral with a few horses in it, and a long, one-story cook shack.

It was Red Brogan's ranch, or rather his headquarters. Taffer knew the buildings and the ranch. He knew that to walk up to them openly would mean only one thing for him now. Death! It would spurt from the buildings with the speed of lightning, striking him before he had a chance to see the men behind the Winchesters.

He studied the ground closely. The five or six horses in the corral told him that most of the rustlers were away from the ranch, but the big roan told him that Red Brogan was there.

He started to crawl through the stubby, stunted grass that grew in the valley. The grass gave his body little coverage, but there was no other way to get to the buildings. If he went slowly and carefully enough, there might be a chance.

Inch by inch he crept over the hot grass. No sign of life came from the buildings as they lay in the scorching heat of the afternoon sun. Far to the right, at the head of the trail that led up to the ranch, were two guards, but they were too far away to cause any worry.

SHERIFF TAFFER came to a clump of saplings. He threw his body in them, turned on his side, bringing one of his six-guns from the holster. The low buildings were less than thirty yards away now. A man came out of one and walked for the cook shack.

Sheriff Taffer was out of the clump of saplings, his body going across the grass like a great snake crawling. Five yards and then ten yards. Then he was on his feet, dashing forward in a crouching position.

A spurt of white smoke came from one of the buildings. A bullet clipped the grass behind him. His gun belched fire, the bullet crashing through a window in the larger building.

And then suddenly the sultry, heat-laden afternoon became an inferno of roaring guns. With a long dive Sheriff Taffer went for the corner of the larger building. He landed on his head and shoulders as two men came rushing out of the house, around the corner after him.

Taffer's six-gun came up in his hand with lightning speed. He fired from his prone position, but the bullets found their mark, and the two men went stumbling and screaming to the grass, one holding his stomach and the other grabbing weirdly for his throat. Taffer was on his feet, around the building. He went through the door, body almost parallel with the earth.

Two guns roared over his head. His plunging body was too low for the bullets, and they *plopped* into the wood walls with dull thuds. He landed behind a large table, pulling it down with him as a barricade. Bullets splintered it. The shadow of a man came in the doorway. Taffer's gun roared. The shadow disappeared into a writhing heap on the ground.

Taffer leaped out from behind the table, his back against the wall, the two six-guns in his hand spitting death at three men at the other end of the room. Through the haze of smoke he saw the brutal, sneering face of Red Brogan, his head of flaming red hair in wild disorder.

His heavy body, with the powerful shoulders, was leaning forward as his hands jerked the six-guns with each explosion. Taffer saw this only in a flash. He saw one of the men by Brogan go down on his face.

Then suddenly a slug hit Taffer's left shoulder with the force of a building falling on it. It sent him back against the wall, the gun dropping from his left hand. His right hand came up, sending a bullet through the head of the rustler standing beside Red Brogan.

The man crumpled to the floor. Another slug hit Taffer's left shoulder. It was numb now, and he felt nothing, save a heavy jar as if a battering ram had hit his shoulder. The numbness in it was spreading to all parts of his left side, even down to his legs.

His gun clicked on an empty cartridge. He had no time to reload. He plunged head-first to the floor as a bullet from Red Brogan's six-gun clipped the wall where his head had been a second before. Taffer hit the floor in a crawling, diving slide. He heard Red Brogan's gun click on an empty cartridge.

Taffer was on his feet, across the floor. Red Brogan's right came out like a piston, connecting with the sheriff's jaw. Taffer staggered back, his knees buckling under him. A feeling of sickness spread over his body. He shook his head.

Red Brogan was coming for him, cursing. Taffer ducked. Brogan sent an uppercut to the sheriff's face, catching the ducking movement. Taffer went to the floor, his senses fading rapidly.

His fingers closed around a gun. He knew it was empty. He was on his feet, his brain a whirlpool of disjointed thoughts. He heard Brogan curse. The sound of the voice was to his right. Taffer lunged out with the gun, bringing it around in a half arc. It crashed against something. A man fell at his feet, groaning weakly.

Outside men were yelling loudly and running for the door. Taffer shook his head. His brain cleared quickly. He paid no attention to the yelling men.

Red Brogan was lying on the floor in front of him. With his right hand, Taffer snapped handcuffs on the rustler's wrists, pulling him over on his stomach.

Then the sheriff turned to face the men rushing into the building.

A WEARY smile filled his lips. Through the film that was gathering over his eyes, he saw the face of Jim Feathers coming toward him. Behind him were the men from Pinto City.

"You crazy old wild cat," Feathers yelled at him, "we figured you'd be fool enough to come up here alone and we weren't letting you get killed."

Sheriff Taffer sank in a chair. Jim Feathers had a whisky flask out. A drink from it cleared Taffer's head, and the film left his eyes. Red Brogan stirred, opened his eyes, staring up at the sheriff and Feathers stupidly.

He closed his eyes, groaned loudly, and then looked at Taffer again.

"Get up, Red," Taffer said weakly. "You put a couple of slugs in my shoulder which is something that hasn't happened for years. But you're going to have that neck of yours in a noose, and it's worth it."

Red Brogan struggled to his feet. His eyes looked at the man in the room with a cunning that showed he had regained his old self.

"I don't know what it's all about, sheriff," he said quietly. "You come charging in my place shooting like a drunken Indian. I guess there is such a thing as a law of self-defense."

"There is, Red," Taffer replied dryly, "but that's one law you won't

have a chance to call to your aid this time. I'm arresting you for cattle rustling and the murder of Quirt Peters."

Red Brogan smiled and shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about, sheriff," he said. "I know nothing——"

"Then maybe you can explain how you come to have Peters's quirt on you," the sheriff interrupted, getting to his feet, slipping his hands in Red Brogan's pockets. "That might be difficult."

The sheriff's hands brought out the leather quirt that Peters had carried, the luxury that had given him his nickname.

Red Brogan laughed at the sheriff's words.

"One of the boys found that along the road this afternoon," he explained. "If it belonged to Peters, I didn't know anything about it. And it will take more evidence than that to convict me of a murder I know nothing about."

Taffer nodded grimly.

"You're right, Red," he admitted. "You can explain the possession of this quirt that way, and it might be hard to get around it. The only trouble is that you overlooked a very important thing about this quirt. A small item, but something that will hang you very high and very long."

Red Brogan's eyes narrowed, and his red face paled.

"If you knew anything about quirts, Red," Taffer continued, "you would know that no quirt is as light as this one."

Sheriff Taffer took the chunks of lead from his pocket and laid them on the table. His face was drawn and tense with pain. His left side slumped and was covered with blood, but he remained standing. Jim Feathers tried to get Taffer to sit down, but the sheriff waved him away.

"This is a story I wouldn't miss telling Brogan if it cost me my life," he said. "When Quirt left my office yesterday looking for the Circle T steers, he started to tell me what he would do if anything happened to him.

"A couple of strangers came along, and he didn't want to yell it out too loud. So he told me to look for hunks of lead if he didn't come back. I found them in his pockets when they brought his body in. They puzzled me until I noticed that his quirt was missing.

"I went back for it. It wasn't around his body. I sorta figured that you wanted to cover up your murder and when you saw that leather whip, which only Peters carried in these parts, you figured it would be an ideal thing to plant on some one, making it look like they murdered Peters.

"That's your way of doing business. So I came here to get you alone. I didn't want a posse riding up and scaring you into discarding it. Now I'll explain to you what Peters meant about the hunks of lead. He went to Devil's Valley to search for those steers, knowing that you had some secret place to hide them. He found out where they were, and you knew he found out.

"But Peters was too smart for you. He took the lead out of the end of the quirt and left a message in the quirt for me. He thought if I could find the hunks of lead in his pocket, I would get wise to what he had done. It took me some time, but it finally dawned on me that those pieces of lead came from the end of his quirt and he had taken them out to place a message in there for me."

Taffer motioned to Jim Feathers to cut open the end of the quirt. Feathers did, and a piece of paper fell out.

Sheriff Taffer picked up the paper and looked at it. A message was scrawled across the paper.

It read:

Cattle of Circle T outfit in cave. Entrance through Death Ravine. Brogan's men guarding them. Send posse. Brogan is following me now. Knows I found entrance. I may not get out of Devil's Valley alive. Am leaving hunks of lead from my quirt in my pocket, hoping you'll have sense enough to figure out what I meant when I told you hunks of lead would tell a whole lot. QUIRT PETERS.

Sheriff Taffer read the note aloud and then handed it to Jim Feathers.

"Get Brogan to town and in jail, Jim," Taffer said. "Then send a posse for the cattle. My head is doing some crazy running around. I guess I'm too old to get slugs in my shoulders and do much talking."

Jim Feathers looked at the note.

"I'll be danged," he said weakly, "if this isn't a new sort of lead justice."

Sheriff Taffer nodded weakly.

"I guess it's something like that," he admitted.

And then the old man sank to the floor in a dead faint, his left side covered with blood and his lean face twisted with the pain he had fought down to tell Red Brogan the story of the two chunks of lead.

Jim Feathers lifted him up and laid him on the table.

"The old fool," Feathers said, "this will lay him up for three weeks, but I guess he was smarter than all of us at that."

BLAZE McGEE

A Serial

By JAY LUCAS

THE McGee family, sick of their long feud with the Downeys, left Kentucky and settled on the Texas prairie. Jess Downey followed them, to be hired as gunman by John Sully, a cattle baron who wanted the McGee range. When Dave was sixteen, he saw his unarmed father shot down by Sully and Jess, and he himself was left for dead. But he recovered, although from then on he was to bear a white streak running back through his dark hair; from that bullet mark, he was to be known from then as "Blaze" McGee.

For four years, until his mother died, he practiced incessantly with a six-shooter. The day after her burial, he sold his ranch and went to town to kill Jess and Sully. In town he met Mary Easton, his old schoolmate, now teacher of the local school. For long she had struggled covertly to kill in him the code of vengeance. Now she made the last great effort—and Blaze found that in him the feudist code was forever dead; he wanted peace.

Peace was not to be his. Sully confronted him, and with him was Pecos Jack, a famous gunman sent for to kill Blaze. But four years of ceaseless practice had made drawing a gun an incredibly swift reflex action to Blaze. Without knowing how it happened, he saw Pecos and Sully fall, their guns dropping from their hands; in his own hand he found his smoking six-shooter.

He fled across the prairie—an outlaw. He had shot purely in self-defense, but well he knew that the Sully wealth would hang him if he were caught. There was but one place safe for him—the Sierras Negras, a wild mountain stronghold of the outlaws where ruled Lew Benedict, a handsome, gentlemanly ex-gambler. Lew welcomed him—until he found that he would not join the gang. Then he sold him a ranch, taking as first payment the seventy-five hundred dollars which Blaze had got for his prairie outfit. A day or two later, Blaze saved the life of Cyril Chalmers, an Englishman. From him he learned that Lew made a practice of selling ranches—but that the purchaser never lived to make the final payment, so that Lew kept both payments and ranch. Blaze went to Lew's office and forced him to give his money back. With it he purchased a half interest in Chalmers's brand—the same money making Chalmers's last payment to Lew.

Then, still following Blaze, came Jess Downey, who became chief under Lew of the outlaws—although Lew hoped to get rid of Jess later on and have Blaze as his lieutenant. Mary had been dismissed from her school because of her friendship with the now notorious Blaze McGee. Lew sent for her to teach in the mountains—and had Jess kidnap her, hoping thus to bring Blaze to terms. But Blaze was going to meet her that night, accompanied by Don Diablo, notorious bandit chief of Mexico. Hiding in the darkness beside a trail, they watched her abductors ride by, with her tied on a horse. Blaze was about to spring forth when he felt the point of a knife at his back; heard a whisper that told him that if he made one move, he would die.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE THROWN KNIFE.

BLAZE lay as though suddenly paralyzed—he *was* suddenly paralyzed. Not for one instant had it occurred to him that this Mexican whom he had come to like so well would prove to be a traitor.

Across his mind flashed Don Diablo's answer when he had asked him what he knew of Lew Benedict: "Ah, a great deal I know—but of that I will tell you to-morrow." Blaze's head was whirling; he tried to think of something he could do. There was nothing. One move, one sound, and Don Diablo would drive the long knife through him; the point was just under his left shoulder blade, and Mexicans were peculiarly adept at reaching the heart with a knife. Getting himself killed would not help Mary.

All these thoughts flashed through his head in an instant; it is amazing how quickly a man can think under such circumstances. The line of horsemen went bobbing past him quickly. Now the last had gone from the sky line, the clatter of hoofs was growing fainter. At least, thought Blaze, he would have the pleasure of giving this treacherous Mexican a piece of his mind—that could make no difference one way or the other if the rat meant to kill him.

"You dirty cur——" he began, his voice quivering.

"But, señor! Leesten! I——"

"I'll listen to nothing! I'll——"

"Leesten queek, amigo! Only when you have leesten will I permit you to rise. You try to do the mad thing; you would have get shoot. I, your *compadre*, stop you, to save you—that we may save the leetle

María. Eef I let you up, you will not fight me, your amigo?"

Blaze's only answer was an oath under his breath. But Don Diablo knew there was no time to lose. Like a cat, he sprang to his feet, sheathing his knife.

"Queek, Blaze—we follow them!"

Gritting his teeth, Blaze ran beside him back to the horses. The Mexican swept his huge sombrero out of the brush and clapped it on his head, even as he bounded into his saddle like a slender coiled spring.

"Git, Blackbird!"

Blaze spat the order even as his toe touched the stirrup. The black knew the order and leaped forward like an arrow. But the slender, shadowy figure reached far out from his saddle and seized Blaze's bridle cheek. Blackbird, snorting with surprise, was swung in a half circle and stopped.

"Not the run, señor! They would hear eet."

"Let loose or I'll plug you!"

"Plug me, señor, if it you weesh. I weel not permit that you lose your life—and the life of María—by thees foolishness. You are now the madman."

Something seemed to snap in Blaze's head, clearing it. He turned, spoke quickly:

"Sorry as hell, Don! I—— Yo're right. Let's go."

The Mexican released his bridle, and together they swung in a trot toward the trail, instead of dashing over the stones as Blaze had attempted to do. Shame swept over Blaze; he had acted childishly.

Of course, their horses made some noise, but it was not likely to be heard by those ahead above the clatter of their own horses. They listened as they rode. At first they heard no sound, and then those ahead swung over a stony wash and the click of steel on stone came back clearly. Blaze, cool-headed once more, spoke quickly:

"They'll see yore light-colored horse if you get close. Let me go ahead on this black, an' you follow me."

"If I should lose you?"

"Can't be helped."

"You are right, *compadre*."

Don Diablo reined his palomino back, and Blaze swung ahead alone.

MILE after mile they went. Blaze stayed as far behind as he dared, and not risk losing the party ahead. Not suspecting that they were followed, they clattered rapidly over the stony places. Here Blaze slowed to a walk, although sometimes, to make up for that, he had to strike a slow lope across the softer ground. At first he could sometimes catch vague glimpses of a light-colored blur far behind him, but the noise of his own horse, the creak of his saddle, the tinkle of his bobbing spurs, drowned any noise the palomino might make. This encouraged Blaze; if he could not hear the horseman following, the band ahead could not hear him.

He thought, as he rode, of what had happened back in the little pass —of what might have happened. If he had sprung forward, he would not have dared to fire at Jess in the darkness, for Mary was between them. There would have been a battle with the others. Conceivably, he might have won; he had the element of surprise in his favor, and twelve cartridges in his guns. But while he was fighting the others, Jess would have disappeared into the hills with Mary, and he would

not have the slightest idea of which way to look for them. Even if he had won the fight, which was doubtful, he would have lost. Don Diablo, far more experienced in midnight affairs, had saved him from his folly—and he had cursed the courteous Don, threatened to shoot him, by way of thanks.

The band ahead swept over a ridge; once more he could see them bobbing against the sky line. There was low brush there; Blaze could see the outlines of the riders clearly, but not those of the horses. He thought rapidly. As he approached the top of the ridge, he leaped from his saddle and ran forward, leading Blackbird.

Once well down beyond the summit, he mounted again. He could not hear the riders ahead, but now he saw the lights of windows directly ahead, in a little draw. Of course they were going to that house, or they would have circled it widely.

He slowed to a walk as he approached the lonely ranch house. If the men were off their horses, one of them might hear him. While he was still some distance off, a larger rectangle of light suddenly appeared; a door had opened. He saw three or four figures pass through, hustling a smaller figure among them. Why did not the others go in? Were they spreading around the house as guards? There could be no other reasonable explanation.

Now Blaze was glancing back anxiously; he had not seen Don Diablo's palomino in a long time. Then a whitish blur came slowly toward him. Of course, the Don could not see him or his black horse; probably he had given his head to the palomino, who would go to Blackbird by scent. Then, looking closely, Blaze could make out the immense hat.

"I was afraid you'd lost me," he whispered, when the other came alongside.

"I have the experience of ride at night. Now we do—what?"

"What would you advise? I've made fool enough of myself for one night."

"True, *compadre*," murmured Don Diablo regretfully, "you have be the jollee burro."

"Huh!" That was an entirely new term of contempt to Blaze.

"So the Señor Chalmers say it—the jollee burro."

"Oh—jolly ass! Not jolly—just a plain ass. Well, how 'bout leavin' our horses here an' sneakin' up afoot?"

"Eet is the theeng to do."

They slipped from their saddles. Both quickly divested themselves of their hats and spurs, and Blaze kicked off his chaps—Don Diablo wore none. Then they stole forward. Sometimes a twig snapped under Blaze's foot, a pebble clicked softly. From the slender figure beside him came no more sound than from a shadow; the Mexican seemed to drift forward through the air rather than to walk.

As they stole forward, it came to Blaze that he received a great feeling of security, of comfort, from this man beside him; Don Diablo seemed so entirely competent at this sort of thing, so entirely at home in this rôle. He himself was but a blundering amateur.

And then a feeling of wonder came to him. How had this gentle, courteous caballero received his gruesome nickname. Don Diablo—Mr. Devil. No—it could best be translated by the British—Sir Devil. Nothing could seem so grotesquely ill-fitting.

NOW they were peering from the edge of the cedars which encircled the clearing around the house. The window shades were all up; there was no suspicion of hidden watchers away off here. Figures passed across the rectangles of light. One paused squarely in the opening to roll a cigarette. Jess Downey! Blaze's fingers twisted on the butt of his gun, but they came away again. It would be an easy shot, but it might ruin his hopes of rescuing Mary—bring a hornets' nest around his ears.

Another figure appeared in the same room with Jess. Lew Benedict—smiling, well dressed, puffing his eternal long, slender cigar. He was talking to Jess; Blaze could barely catch the low hum of their voices but he could not understand what they said.

"That rail fence," whispered Blaze. "Let's crawl down along it."

"*Si.*"

They made their way cautiously around the edge of the cedars until they came to the fence. Then, on hands and knees, they stole toward the window, Blaze leading. He felt with his hands in the shadow, moved every little stick that might snap under his knees. He was halfway to the window when he heard a sound ahead—a man clearing his throat softly. One of the guards, squatted in the shadow of this same fence.

The Mexican feared Blaze had not heard the sound; he placed his hand on Blaze's back, pressed softly in warning. Then he was creeping up alongside. Blaze whispered in his ear:

"Think we could sneak up on him? One of us might go down the other side of the fence an' reach over an' hit him on the head with a gun."

"No, no! Permit me."

Don Diablo slipped quietly ahead. A yard or two in front, he stopped, and there he remained motionless as a stone. For ages, it seemed, they crouched thus. Blaze grew impatient; this would never get them anywhere. Several times he started to crawl up to the other, but he held himself back. The Don must have some plan; he would wait just a few moments more.

And then he saw the guard's head against the sky line; he had raised up to look over the fence. Ahead of Blaze came a tiny swish of cloth—a sleeve moving. There was a little flash in the starlight. The guard sprang erect, and immediately dropped back. Blaze heard a soft whisper:

"Come, señor; I have clear' the way."

Blaze shuddered; he had all the American's usual horror of the knife, of cold steel. A few yards away, he saw the Don reach calmly toward the neck of a sprawled figure, draw forth something, wipe it carefully on that thing on the ground, and return it to his waist. As Blaze came up, there was something of pride in the whisper which greeted him:

"I make the good throw, señor—I cut the espine."

There was no more thought for that thing beside him than if it had been a log. Blaze circled around it all he dared. He felt uneasy; he shuddered as he passed.

The fence ended at a low, flimsy railing which encircled a garden on that side of the house. Here the two crouched, hardly eight feet from the window, which stood open—the night was warm. They could see Lew Benedict seated at a table. From the expression on his face, they judged him to be alone in the

room. Occasionally he glanced casually toward a door opposite the window.

THEN the door was flung open. In it stood Mary, her clothes somewhat disheveled but her head high. There were two men behind her. They pushed her through, but not roughly, and closed the door behind her.

Immediately Lew was springing courteously to his feet. He hurried gracefully around the table, and pushed a chair forward.

"Ah, Miss Easton—won't you have a seat?"

She did not answer him, but her eyes flashed contempt. Lew pretended not to notice. Politely, he spoke again:

"Do you object to smoking, Miss Easton?"

Still no answer. With a shrug, Lew tossed his cigar through the open window; it lay glowing not three feet from Blaze. Then Mary spoke. There was fear in her voice, but also anger:

"Mr. Benedict, I want to know just what this outrage means? What do you want with me?"

"Now, my dear girl!" Lew, smiling, attempted to place a hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged it off and backed away from him. "Well, it is just as I feared—you blame me for what has happened."

"Naturally! I've been in Shaska long enough to know who runs things."

Blaze was surprised at the coolness with which she spoke, but he shrewdly suspected that it was mostly bluff; that she was trying to bluff not only Lew but herself into the belief that she was not afraid.

"But you must allow me to explain, my dear girl!"

"Let me go home—and explain to-morrow."

Lew shook his head regretfully.

"I only wish I could let you go!"

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Just this: but for me, you might have suffered far worse than you did. I found out about those ruffians running off with you, but too late to stop the thing. It took all my influence to persuade them to bring you here unmolested."

"Do you expect me to believe that?" she flashed.

"Believe it or not, I'm doing all I can to protect you. I'll tell you the truth"—he glanced around cautiously, opened the door and peered out, closed it again—"I'm in about as much danger as you are. Those cutthroats are furious because I interfered; I have no control whatever over them."

"What about those stories I've heard about you?"

Lew smiled wearily.

"Why do people believe such tommyrot? Miss Easton, answer me frankly. Do I look like a murderer, a leader of a band of outlaws, head of a cattle-rustling ring—on the whole, a bandit chief?"

She surveyed him a moment. He smiled wistfully at her. At last she answered:

"No, you don't. But how did these stories get around, then?"

Lew fairly groaned.

"How? Because I'm the only man of influence in this county that has had nerve enough to buck the gang. Not being one of it, it wants to make me the scapegoat."

Suddenly he sank into his chair, his arms dropping wearily beside him. He shook his head; it drooped dejectedly.

"Oh, what's the use? You won't believe me—nobody will!"

"But——" She took a step toward him, paused uncertainly. Then she turned to the other chair, sat down.

Presently she spoke again:

"That isn't saying why I have been taken here. What have I done?"

"Nothing. Those ruffians——" He broke off, and suddenly leaned forward. "Say, I have a plan! I think they'll allow me to leave here; I can try, anyway. Give me a note to Blaze McGee; tell him you're in grave danger, and to come with the bearer. I'll see to it that he gets it before the night is over. Between us, we'll get you out of here, or die trying."

SHE hesitated, eying him closely a moment. He met her gaze frankly, anxiously. "Didn't I hear," she asked, "something about you and Blaze having a row?"

"Row!" He stared. "Certainly not! Oh—he was going to buy a ranch from me, but there was a misunderstanding about the terms, so we called the deal off—just to avoid hard feelings between friends. Row! What weird stories get started in Shaska!"

Still she hesitated. He fished hastily in a drawer of the table.

"I'll get you a pen and ink. Better hurry! I don't know how long they'll leave us here together. Where are—— Oh, here they are."

He pushed paper and pen across the table, quickly drew the cork from the bottle of ink. Suddenly she reached for them. She took the pen in her hand and wrote rapidly. Her head was stooped over the paper; she could not see the triumphant smile that flashed for a brief instant across Lew's face. She folded the note, handed it to him. Without a glance, he thrust it in the breast pocket of his immaculate coat.

"Miss Easton"—his voice was soft—"I'm through with this infernal country around here. I'm leaving it for good."

She had no comment to make on this. He spoke again:

"I've been getting ready to leave for some time; I have had all my money transferred to San Francisco banks. I'm leaving within a few days, to go into business there."

She had to say something now.

"Why, Mr. Benedict, I hope you have good luck."

"Thank you, my dear; at least, I shall have the luck of being away from here. But what I was leading up to: these mountains are absolutely no place for a girl of your sort. You—well, you'll be in danger every second you're here."

"I'll try to get another school." She spoke as if she had little hope of being able to—this one had been her last resort.

"I think we can do better than that. You are far too clever a girl to waste your life teaching a country school. I shall be badly in need of a secretary, a girl on whom I can depend absolutely. Could I induce you to take the position? The work will be comparatively easy, and, of course, you will make several times the salary of a country schoolteacher, with chances for advancement."

She answered instantly:

"Thank you very much, Mr. Benedict, but I can't leave Shaska just at present."

"Why, may I ask?" he spoke eagerly.

"Well, if you want to know, Blaze McGee is a friend of mine, and—and I have reasons for wishing to be near him."

"I see—I see. An excellent young

man, Blaze—yes, indeed. While he is here, you stay, too?"

"Yes."

"Quite right in that. I must see what I can do for that young man—something, surely. Oh, yes!" He beamed on her. "Perhaps after he's gone——"

Lew stood up, and strode back and forth across the room, his hands behind his back. Her eyes strayed toward the open window. Perhaps she had thoughts of trying to escape through it; perhaps a faint movement in the shadows outside had half caught her attention.

She seemed to catch a sudden glint, as of a swallow skimming swiftly by. She would have thought it but imagination only that the tassel of the window shade jerked, swayed, before her. She heard a queer little thud behind her.

"Mary! Quick!"

Blaze! His head and shoulders showed in the window. She heard another thud behind her—a heavy one—and started to turn.

"Don't look back, Mary! Come on!"

Before she knew it, she was climbing through the open window, Blaze helping her. Beside Blaze stood another man, a Mexican—handsome, slender, smiling courteously and bowing to her; he looked almost effeminate. In spite of Blaze, something made her look back through the window. A black-clad figure lay stretched across the floor near the door. She stifled a scream; her hand flew to her face. And then she remembered that she had heard no shot, but that the tassel of the window shade had jerked when something passed.

"You—you threw something?"

"Yes, yes!" hastened Blaze, leading her off. "We threw something—knocked him down. Let's go."

"A moment, *compadre*—in the room is a thing I want."

With a courteous smile, the Mexican turned toward the window to regain his knife. Blaze seized his arm.

"Come on! They might come in and catch you. Haven't you another?"

"At the ranch, yes. But it is a trifle; we must remain with Señorita María."

With a polite bow, Don Diablo took her left arm, while Blaze held the right. Between them she slipped away ducked under the railing of the garden. Then they were hurrying, crouched low, beside the rail fence, toward the horses. The touch of the Mexican on her arm was gentle, respectful; she wondered how such a mild-mannered young man had ventured to come here with Blaze.

THEY heard a knock on a door behind them; the sound, of course, came clearly through the open window.

"Hurry!" whispered Blaze.

Presently, another knock, more peremptory. They had reached the cedars now. Blaze stopped a moment, turned. Through the window, he could see the door swing open. Jess Downey stood there, his eyes sweeping the apparently empty room in amazement. Then he glanced down. He recoiled a step, half raising his hands, his mouth opening. Then he was starting forward hurriedly.

And then Blaze saw him stop. Slowly his expression changed, until it was almost one of triumph. He, Jess, would now be the leader of the most powerful, the most feared, the wealthiest gang in Texas. A great fortune would be his—and even greater influence.

Blaze saw him start again, surprise on his face. Once more he took a step forward. His lips moved, although Blaze could not catch the words. And then, with a shrug, Jess was whirling. Blaze heard his shout:

"Out, fellers! Horses! Lew's been killed—knifed; some one come in through the window an' got out that way again. After 'em before they——"

The door slammed, and Blaze did not hear the rest. But almost instantly the outside door was flung open. Blaze heard the snorts of startled horses. He could well imagine men leaping into their saddles. Again came Jess Downey's shout:

"Damn it, hurry up! Everybody on the place after 'em!"

By now the three had reached their horses. Blaze heard a quick whisper close to his ear:

"María weeth you ride double. I lead them off. Wait till they go."

He saw a slender, shadowy figure leap onto the white blur of the palomino and disappear in a swift, swinging trot, dodging branches that might cause a sound. He placed his arm around Mary's waist; it was the first time. She pressed close to him, trembling.

In a few seconds, from halfway around the clearing, came a wild, echoing yell:

"Coom an' get us!"

A shout from Jess: "After 'em quick—everybody! Stay together—with me!"

A mocking laugh, a gun fired in the air in bravado, and a horseman was dashing noisily away, clattering over the stones, crashing through the branches. Again the mocking laugh; another shot, but farther off. Pursued and pursuers were flying rapidly out of hearing. Blaze was thinking fast. He whispered:

"Can't ride double—might find us—couldn't outride 'em. I'll get your horse."

He sprang on Blackbird and dashed to the front of the house. He found her pony easily, standing with dragging reins. He knew he should lead it back to her instantly, but he could not do it. He remembered Jess standing there in the room, sneering down at the floor, speaking. A man was dying there—dying like a dog. He was Blaze's enemy—but he was a human being. Blaze's head told him to get away as quickly as possible; his big, generous heart said, "Stay!"

With an oath of disgust with himself and his softness, he ran around the corner of the house, threw a long leg over the window sill, and raced across the room to bend over the prostrate figure. Lew lay in a pool of blood, but his eyes were open; they followed Blaze from the window. There was no fear in them; perhaps Lew was too weak, too dazed, to feel fear. His lips moved, and Blaze bent over to catch the words:

"You came back—to—finish me?"

Blaze spoke quickly:

"I didn't do it; I'm no knife thrower."

"El—El Diablo—he swore to—to get me."

"Don't talk."

Blaze had drawn his knife from his pocket and was quickly cutting Lew's clothes from him. Only when the skin was exposed did he dare to pull out the Mexican's long knife. He was surprised to find that it was too low down—must have missed the heart by inches. The blood gushed forth freshly, but from the steadiness of the stream Blaze guessed that a main artery had not been cut.

When Blaze drew his knife, Lew had but smiled wearily, waiting for the end. Now his eyes were widening a trifle; he could not believe them. Blaze was making a pad of Lew's white shirt, pressing it over the gaping wound, binding it around the man's body with strips of the hastily torn tablecloth. He spoke quickly:

"Relax all you can—don't try to help me."

Lew obeyed. Blaze picked the limp body up in his arms, and hurriedly carried it to the lounge. He placed Lew down gently, raised his head comfortably on pillows, hastily readjusted his bandages.

"Sorry, Lew—can't stop to do any more. They might come back an' get me."

"They—won't come back—till—till Jess thinks I'm—I'm dead. He wants——" Lew's voice trailed off.

"I'll send the doctor." Blaze did not know what made him promise that—did not know why he should feel sorry for this cur. He was turning off, but he saw a hand beckon feebly. He came back quickly, to see the pallid hand reaching up in a gesture he could not mistake. He reached down, pressed it.

"So long, old-timer."

"So long—enemy!" A faint smile came to the wounded man's face, to be wiped out by a twitch of pain. Lew's eyes followed as Blaze dived hastily through the window and disappeared.

CHAPTER XV.

THE RAIDERS.

BLAZE rushed back to the horses, mounted, and led Mary's to her. He did not take time for courtesy; he led her horse alongside and let her scramble quickly into the saddle unassisted. Then they were swinging away through the darkness. Almost instantly Mary spoke:

"Not back to Shaska! Can't you take me to the ranch—until I can leave this awful place?"

"I'm going to. I've business in Shaska first. Anyway," he added hastily, "they'll look for us to ride toward the C Bar Y; this'll throw 'em off."

She did not ask what the business was; she trusted Blaze implicitly.

The pursuers of Don Diablo had long got far out of hearing; the Don would lead them a merry chase on his fast palomino. Still, Blaze thought it only common sense to listen intently as he rode, and this prevented much conversation; what little there was consisted of strangely formal remarks, but spoken in strangely gentle tones. Both remembered that pressure of Blaze's arm around her waist. Had the darkness not been so great, Blaze could have seen a soft glow of color on Mary's face, a new sparkle in her eyes, a smile on her lips.

And could Mary have seen, beside her rode a young man who had a new set to his wide shoulders, a new pride in the carriage of his head—and a very grim face. Man, the protector, rode beside Woman, the protected, as it has been since the world was new. So shall it always be where "civilization" has not made so-called men effeminate, made women falsely masculine—and destroyed both the true man and the true woman.

It seemed but minutes until, from a ridge, they saw the yellow window lights of Shaska below them; how had they got there so soon? Blaze led Mary to a dense patch of trees, and whispered gently:

"Wait here, Mary. I have to send a doctor to Lew; he's badly hurt."

"But—some one may see you!" Panic came over her; she could not lose him now!

"Nobody in town I'm afraid of; the worst of 'em are out the other way, looking for us."

He rode softly for some distance, and then struck a lope. He went clattering boldly down the street, to stop opposite a shabby, dirty house and knock at the door. A few passers-by stared unbelievingly when they saw him; looked nervous. He but glanced at them coldly, and they shrank away hurriedly. The door opened, and Doctor Branney stood blinking out at him. He was just the sort of doctor one would have expected to find in Shaska—small, shabby, mean-faced, with shifty eyes; even his gray hair could not lend him dignity or a professional air. He saw who stood outside and recoiled a step.

"Blaze McGee!"

Blaze spoke quickly, contemptuously:

"Lew's been knifed out at the JK Ranch—get out there *quick!*"

"Uh—you say——" He turned fussily, reached for a shabby little black bag which lay on a stand near the door. "Lew—I'll get my buggy as quick——"

"Buggy nothing!" snapped Blaze. "Go horseback—cut over the short way."

"But——"

"I've told you what to do!"

Blaze met his eye an instant, slammed the door in his face, and leaped back into his saddle. Then he was dashing back up the street as he had come.

HE joined Mary, and they circled through the hills until they struck the C Bar Y road some distance from town. Then, side by side, they trotted along, back toward the ranch. When they got there, the bunk house was in darkness, but in spite of the hour a light showed through the living-room windows of the ranch house. A tired palomino which stood with hanging head by the gate explained this. They were not halfway across the veranda when the door swung open before them and three faces peered out.

"Ah—Señor Blaze—and the señorita!" Don Diablo bowed and smiled as though they were chance but welcome visitors.

Mrs. Chalmers was holding out her arms, and Mary was running into them. In an instant Mary was crying on the other woman's shoulder and Mrs. Chalmers was whispering soothing, comforting things in her ear. Chalmers himself glanced at them uncomfortably, and came forward.

"Back, old chap? Er—won't you have a cup of coffee to brace you up?"

Blaze could hardly keep from grinning at the cold, formal face; the Englishman was trying to hide his relief.

"If you don't mind," he answered, with a slow grin that made Chalmers look still more uncomfortable, "*and* a cigar."

"Er—surely. Come in. Sit down. You must be—er—tired—what?"

Blaze threw himself into the leather chair and stretched his long legs toward the fireplace.

"Pretty hectic night!"

"Rather—from what Martínez said."

"Martínez? Oh! We hadn't got it exactly straight there, Chalmers; the gentleman isn't a regular cowboy. His name is—is Don Miguel Nolán." Blaze was afraid his Mexican friend would be snubbed if the

Englishman knew his true status in the world.

Chalmers bowed gravely, silently. But his bow seemed a stiff, clodhopper thing beside that of Don Diablo.

"Er—Blaze, I fail to understand why you did not tell me of your going to—er—to Shaska to-night. I regret that you did not ask me to accompany you."

Chalmers spoke stiffly. Blaze guessed that his partner's feelings had been hurt by being thus ignored. He spoke quickly:

"I didn't have time to look for you. Anyway, Don Miguel has some—uh—accomplishments that you haven't, but that sure came in handy. If you'd been with me, we might both be dead now."

"I rather think not. We'd have—er—muddled through somehow."

Blaze glanced at him speculatively. Suddenly he nodded.

"I believe it! You English have the darnedest way of doing everything wrong, of muddling things—but you *always* come out all right in the end. I reckon"—he grinned frankly—"it's because you're too bullheaded to know when you're licked."

Chalmers bowed again, stiffly. He seemed unable to make up his mind whether Blaze meant that for a compliment or an insult. Don Diablo, who seemed as thoroughly at home in a drawing-room as on a horse, laughed.

"The Americanos—the Inglese—always they will make the quarrel weeth each other! Always they weel call each other the fool. Yes, always—teel one get in the trouble, and then side by side they fight."

Chalmer's stern face cracked in a grin.

"Right, old top! Blaze had what he'd call 'no use' for me—until he found that I was in grave difficulty. Then——" Chalmers shrugged.

"And when the war come—the beeg war—so it weel be. Wheechever get in the war first and is in the danger, soon the other beside him fight. And while they fight, they call each other the fool. When the war eet is over, each swear that nevair again weel he fight beside the other—and the other get in the war, and what happen?"

"Well—deuce take it!—isn't blood thicker than water?" challenged the Englishman.

"Of a certainty! But me, I theenk both the jolly burro."

"Eh—what?" Chalmers stared.

"Pardner, he's calling us jolly asses."

"Oh—quite so!"

A laugh went up. Mrs. Chalmers came forward smiling.

"Now, I'm going to put this poor, tired girl to bed, and I'm such an ill-mannered hostess that I feel like hinting that the rest of you go there, too."

"Hint taken, ma'am!"

Blaze reached for his hat, and it was hardly more than fifteen minutes until the ranch lay in darkness.

IN spite of the late hour when they went to bed, Blaze and Don Diablo were up early. They sat on the ground, their backs against a corral, talking in low voices.

"Yes," Blaze was saying, "we'll have to do it to-night. They'll be sort of upset about Lew, and Jess won't know exactly where he stands."

"But why have they gather' so many horses?"

"Well, all I can figure out is that Lew was plannin' to clean up and leave here. Nobody seems to know

how many of those horses he was figurin' on sellin'—it's like cattle; you have to drive in everything you find on the range, an' cut out what you want after you get them in a herd. Try to pick one or two out of a bunch outside, and you'd run your horse to death and get nothing."

"How manee have he gather?"

"I can't find out for sure—must be well over a thousand head, includin' mares an' colts."

"And you want to run all off?"

"Sure. I thought of cattle first, but they drive too slow. The gang would gather and wipe us out before we got halfway to the line. Horses—the main trouble is to keep up with them when they get goin' right."

"I see but one difficultee. Are you sure that your money the man in Méjico will pay? Once I drive a band of veree fine horses north across the line, and the man who take them laugh at me when I ask for the money."

"Huh? Didn't think you'd get stung that way, Don. Who was he, if I might ask?"

Don Diablo laughed softly.

"Our friend Lew Benedict."

"So that's why——" Blaze gasped.

"I say to him then, 'I am not like you—I always pay the thing I owe,' and last night I do pay heem. Ees it the secret to who you sell the horses, eef you get them across the line?"

"Well"—Blaze hesitated, but decided to tell the Don all—"they're goin' to an American down there, Frank Weaver."

"Oh, heem I know well. He"—Don Diablo laughed softly—"is the most honest horse thief in Méjico. Besides"—his voice was silken—"he know me, so he weel pay."

Blaze frowned, shook his head.

"All worries me is leavin' the ranch here unprotected. I tried to get the Chalmers family to leave. I'm afraid the gang will come down on it while we're gone."

"I, too, have think of that, and of the plan. I will write to Lew Benedict and tell him that I, Don Diablo, have taken back the horses I leave with him once—with the good interest."

"Say—that's a great idea! We won't be gone long, anyway; like I say, drivin' range horses is mostly a matter of how fast you can ride. Weaver's goin' to have his men just across the line to take them over."

They sat thinking silently for a while. The Don sighed and raised his head.

"How I mees Lew so badly I do not know; I throw for the heart."

"Oh, that! Mary told me on the way home last night of seeing the tassel of the window shade jerk like something had struck it; she thought we'd only thrown a stone and knocked him out. Maybe that turned the knife a little."

"Ah, that ees it! I am glad to know that I am not get clumsee. Next time, I watch for the tassel." Don Diablo was beaming with relief.

Slim Baker came strolling up.

"Mawnin', gents!"

"Hello, Slim. I've just been telling the Don the whole plan."

"Fine! Such an expeht hawse thief will be a lot of help to us," drawled Slim.

Blaze glanced nervously at the Mexican; he half expected him to toss a knife at Slim. But Don Diablo was beaming at the compliment. He stood up and bowed politely to Slim, who winked at him casually.

AFTER breakfast began a very busy day, strangely in contrast to the idleness of the days before. Blaze did not tell his men what he proposed to do; he meant to leave that until the last moment, so that warning could not go to the Benedict outfit. He had, with Slim and the Don, formed a plan; that evening in the bunk house, he would call for volunteers for the raid. Those who hung back, he meant to hold informal prisoners in the bunk house, with a man or two to guard them for three or four hours. By using tact in this, he judged that nobody would cause a row—unless Lew had spies in the crowd, and with these he would deal peremptorily, perhaps tie them up securely until morning.

He had the remuda rounded up, and instructed every man to rope his fastest and toughest horse. There was no mention of bed horses. Nor were pack mules caught—light packs were fitted to the backs of good, fast saddle horses, with a small store of provisions; food that could be warmed hurriedly or eaten cold.

By this time the place was buzzing with excitement, with wild rumors. There were yarns circulating that Blaze McGee was going to besiege Shaska, to drive all his stock to a new range in New Mexico, and other weirdly impossible things. And then, probably from Blaze being seen so often in close conversation with Don Diablo, the yarns simmered down to one: Led by Blaze and the Don, they were going to make a wild raid into Mexico, and drive back enough stock to cover his depleted range. One of the men even asked Blaze about this; Blaze grinned knowingly and hinted that the men surely were clever to guess so well. That settled it; a raid on some huge Mexican hacienda it was.

But even before this, while nothing seemed definite but that there was going to be some desperate adventure of some sort, Blaze was surprised at the spirit of his men. In their idleness, they had been inclined to quarrel slightly, to be cranky. Now grins and yells greeted him everywhere; the day became almost a fiesta. Slim had chosen the men well—gathered very nearly the wildest in that wild country.

But there was a little band headed by "Shorty" Bedford who looked gloomy, hung back. They stayed together, apart from the others, glancing around uneasily, whispering. Slim spent half his time with them; he seemed to be talking like a Dutch uncle to bring them around. With two of the youngest, he succeeded; they left the group and assisted in the preparations. As to the five left, Blaze guessed that he could not count on them. It was something of a blow to him, for they were perhaps the five on whom he would have depended most—quiet, somewhat hard-boiled fellows who, instinct told him, would have tackled their weight in wild cats and licked them, if they took the notion. Well, he would have to get along without them.

At last the preparations were complete. Saddled horses stood everywhere, horses with their light packs. There was an early dinner, and then Blaze gathered every one in the bunk house. He had quietly instructed the cook to lock the rear door. Standing in the front one, he spoke:

"Boys, you all know the history of this outfit. It was once about

the largest single brand in the Sierras Negras, but Lew's gang has stripped it to the bone—stolen nearly everything on the range. How many of you are willing to stick with the brand and help me get some of it back?"

Some one spoke up:

"How you fixin' to go about it, Blaze?"

There was no use in beating about the bush. He turned to the speaker.

"Ned, I'm goin' to run off that bunch of horses Lew has rounded up—run 'em over the line an' sell 'em in Mexico."

"Jest like that!" Another laughed—but it was a reckless laugh.

"And," continued Blaze, "half of what we get out of them is to be divided up among you boys, in addition to your wages. When we come back, I'm going to pay you five dollars each for calves—an' mavericks—you brand C Bar Y. Any one wants to can soon make a stake—if he's handy with a brandin' iron."

He stopped speaking. There was a long silence. Blaze's heart fell. He swept his eyes over the crowd, spoke again, but with little heart:

"How many of you are willing to go through with it with me?"

A lanky, rawboned young fellow took his cigarette from his mouth, to drawl:

"Well, what the devil you waitin' for? Let's go!"

HEADS were nodding everywhere. They nudged each other cheerfully. Some excitement at last, after being half asleep for days.

"Any one that doesn't want to go, come up here; I'll hold no hard feelings."

"Count us out, Blaze—too crazy for us."

Shorty Bedford walked up coolly, the other four around him. A yell of derision began, but Blaze stopped it with a warning gesture. Shorty spoke again:

"We want to know what'll happen to the women an' kids here while you're doin' all that—something might."

"Why, I've a plan so's the gang won't know that it was us did it—not for a few days, and we'll be back by that time."

"An' if somethin' goes wrong with yore fine plan?"

Blaze shifted his feet uncomfortably. He had been trying to tell himself that nothing would go wrong, but he knew that there was always a chance of the unexpected.

"Well, we have to risk that. I tried to get 'em to leave."

"Riskin' plenty!" said Shorty sarcastically. "Well, we don't want nothin' to do with this horse stealin'—not that we blame you for it; it's sort of honest horse stealin'. But we'll do somethin' else for you if you'll let us—I mean we'll do it for the women an' kids."

"What?" asked Blaze.

"We'll stay here an' sorter guard the place; if the ranch ain't raided while yo're gone, I'll eat my hat."

Shorty was calmly rolling a fresh cigarette. Blaze surveyed him as closely as he could. From his expression, he could tell just exactly nothing. It struck him as more than likely that those men were spies of Lew's. But Slim came forward quickly and whispered in his ear:

"Take 'em up on it! Great! I'll guarantee personally that they're all right."

"All right, Shorty; I sure do appreciate what you're doin' for me."

Shorty gave him a look of disgust—almost a sneer.

"Blaze, we're doin' nothin' for you; we wouldn't do nothin' for any one as crazy as you are. It's the women an' kids we're thinkin' of. If you ain't got sense enough to look after 'em, some one has to."

And with a last withering glance Shorty Bedford strolled coolly from the room, followed by the other four. A guffaw from the rest followed, but they did not seem to hear it.

"All right, boys; let's go!"

Blaze turned and walked through the door and toward his horse. But he stopped, staring. There was Chalmers, already mounted, waiting for him. The Englishman looked the picture of misery, of unhappiness, of sheer disgust with life and everything in it. His face was white.

"What the devil?" gasped Blaze. "Here you've been lecturin' me all day, tryin' to talk me out of goin'—tellin' me you'd never speak to me again."

Chalmers shrugged miserably and gathered up his reins.

"It's a most reprehensible thing, this stealing horses—even if it is only to get back what was stolen from us. But if you're mad enough to insist on going through with it, I'm not going to be a quitter."

"Quittaw!" A wild-looking young cowboy chuckled. "He could give Slim cards an' spades an' lick him at killin' r's!"

Another laughed, yelled shrilly:

"Long live the king, the queen, an' all the little princesses! I'll bet he's the best horse thief of the lot of us!"

Chalmers stared icily. Blaze rode up to him and spoke:

"Pardner, I'd like to have you along, but one of us has to stay to look after the women and children. Now, which is it?"

Chalmers thought it was but a ruse to leave him at home, but Blaze soon convinced him to the contrary; he had his doubts as to Shorty and the four others who had offered to guard the place. There was a scramble of mounting men; then they were riding down the road, Chalmers staring unhappily after them from his saddle.

Blaze, riding beside Don Diablo in the lead, glanced back. Two handkerchiefs were waving from the veranda; he was glad that he was not near enough to see the faces of Mrs. Chalmers and Mary. He waved back, and reined his horse to the hillside, off the road, the wild band behind him laughing and joking.

THEY might have laughed less if they had known that before they had gone two thirds of the way to their destination a staggering, foam-lathered horse dashed through the streets of Shaska, to stop suddenly before a large, pretentious house. The rider flung himself from the saddle, raced up the steps, and burst open the door without pausing to knock. A moment later, he dashed into a bedroom on the second floor.

"Git out, doc! Somethin' private!"

Doctor Branney fussily picked up his shabby bag and hastened to the door. Outside, he hesitated; he would have liked to stop there to listen, but he was afraid. He went shuffling down the stairs.

"What's happened!"

Jess Downey had sprung to his feet from his chair beside the bed.

The pale-faced man who lay there did not yet waste energy on questions.

"Blaze an' that greaser are leadin' the whole gang somewhere. Looks like they're headed for Cold Springs Ranch; I figger they're aimin' to run off the horses."

"Let's go!" shouted Jess. "Call every one together; we must get ahead of 'em an' lay for 'em somewhere—we can cut across."

He seized his hat and leaped toward the door, but before he reached it, a weak voice stopped him.

"Wait, Jess!"

Jess whirled savagely on the wounded man.

"Wait, hell! Yo're sick—I'm runnin' things now. It's jest what we want—a chance to wipe 'em out."

Lew smiled feebly.

"Sit down. I'm still boss of the Sierras Negras."

Jess glared at him, but sit down he did; there was something in Lew's tone that made him. Lew turned his eyes, but not his head, to the newcomer:

"Had they pack horses?"

"Why, three or four, with small packs."

"I thought so. What does that mean, Jess?"

Although Jess was not so quick as Lew, he was very far from slow-witted.

"Huh! Aimin' to run 'em across the line. That means they'll take the whole works. We'd better get after 'em quick!"

Again Lew smiled feebly.

"No; we can do better than that. You were just saying that you're worried about so many Texas Rangers gathering in San Juan. We'll give them something to do."

He turned his eyes again to the man who had borne the message.

"Al, get Babe Elkins as quick as you can; he's light on a horse. Have him take my blood bay—fastest horse in Shaska—and ride like the devil to Procter's ranch; Mike's a friend of ours, and he can get a fresh mount there. Then to the Rafter Box for another. Then to San Juan, to turn the Rangers out. Tell him not to say whose horses are being run off. Have him advise the Rangers to wait until they're nearly to the river, so that they'll know for sure it was an attempt to cross them. Get going!"

The man raced for the door and went clattering down the stairs. Jess growled to the wounded man:

"I don't like it, Lew! You should have let me just clean 'em out. What if they lick the Rangers and get across?"

"Just as well for us, Jess. A man who kills a Ranger or two is as good as hanged; they'll get him before long. Always better to let some one else do your fighting for you."

"But"—Jess hated to admit that the other was right—"how about our men at the Cold Springs Ranch? Blaze an' his gang will wipe 'em out."

There was a faint movement of the covers as though Lew had shrugged slightly.

"Their lookout. Can't be helped."

"But—there'll be outside brands on some of those horses that we can't explain, after the Rangers find out they're ours."

"We'll know nothing about them—let Blaze explain where he stole them. Now, I want to sleep. Hand me that medicine, and then get out. That matter we were talking over—I've decided to let it go while there are so many Rangers around."

CHAPTER XVI.

TEXAS RANGERS.

BLAZE had timed things so that he could ride very leisurely and reach the Cold Spring Ranch an hour or so after dark. His men had to save their mounts, to have them as fresh as possible; driving half-wild range horses, especially at night, would call for the most reckless kind of riding. Still, he was a trifle early. On the shoulder of a hill from which he could see the lighted windows of the ranch house, he stopped his men. They swung from their saddles, lounged around for almost half an hour before Blaze gave the signal, and then, after carefully tightening their cinches, remounted and rode slowly, silently down.

Before his break with Lew, Blaze had spent several days at this ranch; he knew the horse pasture well. There was a dam in one corner, and just beyond this dam stood the house. No doubt many of the horses would be close to the water, even at night; he would have to drive them past the house, and close to it.

With his men, he circled far outside the house and came to the back of the pasture. Here a wide break was made in the fence, and two men left to guard it so that nothing could escape while the rest were being rounded up.

The plan was simple. Blaze and Don Diablo were to steal down to the dam and, in a slow walk, drive off any horses in that corner. Back behind the house waited the others, in charge of Slim Baker. When Blaze had come near them, they were to spread out and form a dragnet, driving the other horses in the pasture toward the gap they had made at the back. Putting the horses through there, there would be running, noise, but they trusted that it would not be heard so far from the house. That was the plan if everything went well; if it did not, every one was prepared for a quick battle.

The thing began very well. Blaze and his companion reached the dam, and circled close to the corner of the fence. Then they came back, riding very slowly, often even stopping. By luck, it happened that the horses there were fairly gentle. They moved uneasily away, but not one snorted an alarm.

Things were going so well that Blaze suddenly changed his plans. He whispered to the Don, and trotted softly toward the corral where the night horses were held. He swung from his saddle, and inch by inch he opened the gate so that it would not squeak. Having got it halfway open, he mounted and circled around outside the corral to the back, where he whistled very softly, waved his hat, hoping the horses would see it in the darkness. They did; quietly, they strung out of the gate, to join their companions outside. That would leave the men in the house without a single mount to follow, to carry word to Shaska.

Blaze had just joined Don Diablo —they were just congratulating themselves on their success—when the unexpected happened. From beside the house came a sudden din of noise in the still night air—the furious barking of a dog. Blaze sagged in his saddle.

"I—I forgot old Spot!"

They were close enough to hear a sudden clatter in the house. A door was thrown open; in it they could see the figure of a man, a carbine in his hand.

"Go git 'em, Spot! What is it, ol' feller?"

The dog was coming toward them, cautiously, slowly, but barking frantically. The man in the door stepped outside into the darkness, but two others took his place.

"Blowed up!" whispered Blaze, his hand falling to his gun. He had tried to avoid a battle, but that was not to be. From beside him came a soft, low laugh.

"I feex that."

And suddenly the air was rent by a series of shrill, wailing sounds, snapping forth like the cracks of a whip, rising, falling, dying off in a long, high-pitched wail. Blaze gasped; it seemed impossible that such an unearthly din could come from a human mouth.

THE sound seemed to make the old dog frantic. He redoubled his barking—but now he was backing hastily toward the house again.

Once more the shrill medley of sound arose beside Blaze. It was too much for Spot; Blaze saw him appear in the stream of light just outside the door. Well Spot knew that a sharp-fanged coyote can easily kill practically any dog; he saw in this a deep-laid plot to entice him away from the safety of the house, to where, perhaps, two or three more coyotes would be waiting to join in the fun of slashing him to pieces. But he redoubled his barking; coyotes were out there, but there were also strangers of whom his masters should know.

Then into the patch of light swooped a man. His hand reached out and roughly seized the dog by the back of the neck, threw him angrily through the door into the house.

"Git in there, you old fool, an' stay there! If a coyote *would* git you sometime, we might have less racket around here."

The man stamped back into the house; the door slammed behind him.

"An' that feex it!" Don Diablo laughed softly.

The noise had driven the loose horses back still farther from the corner. A half circle of men, riding very slowly, was coming behind them. It did not look as if they were being rounded up, but still they did not want those men too close. They moved away, back toward the other end of the pasture. Presently they saw the shadowy figures again; they moved still farther. More horses were joining them; it began to look like a round-up, after all. They went a little faster.

And before long a great herd of horses was pouring through the gap, streaming out. One or two of the wilder ones snorted in alarm, and swung toward the lead.

"Take the point on your palomino; they'll follow him," whispered Blaze.

Don Diablo swung off in a fast trot. One of the wilder horses tried to get before him, but he dashed home his great spurs and shot ahead. Then, in a dead run, he was tearing wildly south, swinging down into a narrow draw, up the other side. And behind him, with a great clattering of hoofs, raced a dark mass. Wanting to run, they were following the leader.

Outside them on each side was a line of racing horsemen, to turn any "bunch breakers." Blaze, spurring madly through the starlit darkness, called to a shadowy figure:

"We're off! Let 'em keep movin' fast as they want to."

The figure was Slim Baker. He called, with a reckless laugh:

"Movin' is right, pahtneh! Tu'ned out to be easy as eatin' goobehs!"

"Oh—that you, Slim? How many head, you reckon?"

"Plenty! Not less than seven hundred, I figger."

"Good!"

"Wondeh if that's what Lew'll say—an' Jess Downey—when they heah about it?"

Blaze sighed with relief.

"That's the best of it! With them fellers all afoot, Lew an' Jess can't hear about it till we're at least twenty miles away, an' that'll be late for 'em to do anything but cuss. So—— *Head him off!*"

A dark shape was swinging out from the bunch. Slim's quirt sang through the air, and he raced to turn it back. On, on, thundered the great band of horses, following that gray blur that skimmed ahead. Going too fast for the ridden horses. Don Diablo threw back his head, and over the roar of hoofs came a soft baritone voice—a very good voice that hinted of training:

"Cuando sali de la Habana, Valgame Diós."

It was *"La Paloma"*—"The Dove." As he sang, the Don's hand reached down and patted his racing horse's neck; *palomino* means 'little dove," although on the Southwestern ranges it is only understood as a horse which is silvery even to the mane and tail, a color rarely found.

The mad speed of the band checked a trifle, became more steady. Still they were kept to a swift run at first. Swinging over a high ridge, Blaze looked back and saw the distant glow of ranch-house windows, peaceful-looking. Again he sighed with immense relief. He had not expected such good luck. Now, Lew and Jess would not hear of this until the horses were almost to the Rio Grande.

FIFTEEN minutes later, as they were swinging across a little sandy valley, Blaze heard one cowboy shout to another—it was not meant for his ears:

"Say, what's he tryin' to do—kill our horses?"

"Looks like it!" came the answer. "We'll be afoot in a couple of hours."

Blaze called: "That you, Red? Ride in close to me."

The cowboy did, ready to argue. But Blaze did not speak again. He pressed closer to the horses, crouched low in his saddle, sizing them up as well as he could in the poor light. By now, the broncs had taken their place in the lead, the old and the slow had dropped back. Blaze was opposite the middle of the swing, where the strong but fairly gentle horses would likely be. Suddenly his rope shot out. There was a snort of surprise, but no pull against him; he had caught a thoroughly rope-broken horse, which came trotting toward him once it felt the rope.

"Here you are, Red; change quick. Lead yours up and let him in the bunch."

He caught a second horse, and gave it to the first passing rider. The third seemed a powerful animal. He quickly shifted his saddle to it from Blackbird and then, leading Blackbird, was racing to catch up. So, mounts were changed without losing a moment. He had meant to do all this roping himself, having more faith in his own judgment to pick suitable mounts, but just as he came up with the rear of the band, he passed a man quickly transferring his saddle to an animal he had caught. He opened

his mouth to speak, but rode by in silence; he did not want any arguments.

Thus they thundered on through the darkness. Whenever a man felt his mount lagging, he but roped another and changed quickly, turned his own into the band. They made tremendous speed in this way; before two hours, the men in the drag were whipping the slower horses with their ropes to make them keep up. A few, old horses, mares heavy with colt and such, they allowed to drop out, but these were not many.

At last a faint gray showed in the east—so faint that at first Blaze could not be sure it was there. But it grew, spreading up the sky. The dark mass gave place to bobbing heads; presently colors of the horses could be distingushed faintly. Blaze dashed up to Don Diablo, who still rode in the point, but now on a big, long-legged sorrel.

"Hold 'em up, pardner! Let's have some breakfast."

More men came dashing to the point at the signal. Voices raised soothingly:

"Ho-o-old up! Ho-o-old up!"

Even the wildest of the horses by now was willing to pause. The band formed a milling circle. A few riders quickly roped out the pack horses and led them to one side. Then, while half the men ate a hasty, cold meal, the others circled the herd. The first to finish eating went dashing back in a run to the band. A man saw him coming and passed him halfway. He waved a hand, yelled:

"How you like horse stealin', Bob?"

"*Muy bueno*—easy as eatin' pie! No more cow-punchin' for me."

It was only a matter of minutes until the herd was moving again, three or four men behind hastily whipping the lightly loaded pack horses to make them catch up. Slim, his face covered by a broad, cheerful grin, came loping up to Blaze.

" 'Bout how far you figgeh it is to the line, Blaze?"

"Can't be much more than ten miles now; we came twice as far as I figured on last night."

"Some driftin'! Any one tryin' to catch up will have a sweet ol' time!"

Slim's eyes happened to fall on a strong, chunky buckskin at the edge of the band. Although the horse he rode was not tired, he shook loose his rope and edged toward it, pretending not to notice it. Presently he was back behind the band, changing his saddle quickly. To him, as to the others, this thing was becoming just plain fun—a sort of game. The buckskin turned out to be a bucker—a bad one. Blaze glanced back often as he rode, to see Slim heaved and tossed wildly in the saddle, a cloud of dust rising around him. But Blaze did not worry; Slim was a first-class rider. Presently he got the horse lined out and came sweeping toward them waving his hat, driving his last mount madly ahead and into the band.

"Out of my way—I'm *mounted* now!" He laughed as he swept by.

Twenty minutes later, from the top of a high divide, they saw a silvery ribbon winding far ahead.

"That, suh," called Slim to Blaze, "is what they call the Rio Grande—Spanish for Big River."

There was the roar of hoofs as the great band of horses went down the ridge in a swinging trot. Perhaps they, too, had seen the water and were anxious to reach it. They were just coming to the level

ground below when Blaze heard a startled yell:

"We're followed!"

HE looked back. Down the side of the ridge, coming at a tangent, was a little group of men—a quick count made it nine. Even at that distance, Blaze could see in the clear air that they were slim, wiry fellows and splendidly mounted. Something about them—perhaps that so small a party should dare to attack so openly—sent his heart tumbling into his boots. From around him he heard a panic-stricken yell that but echoed his own thoughts:

"The Rangers!"

"We're sunk!" shouted somebody. "Let's leave the horses an' run for it!"

Blaze felt suddenly weak all over. Victory had seemed so very near—and then this had come! Even the most reckless of his men would not be likely to attempt to fight the Texas Rangers. He himself did not want to—if a Ranger were killed, never again would he or any of the others dare come a step across the line; the Texas Rangers never forgot, never forgave.

"What'll we do?"

Even the reckless Slim was a trifle white, looked sick. For an instant Blaze hesitated, and then he raised his voice:

"Whip 'em up! Run the legs off 'em! We got a good start."

He feared his men would not obey, but they, too, hated to lose the prize that lay almost in their hand. Don Diablo was already yelling like a madman, swinging his rope across the hips of the slowest horses. Slim paused uncertainly, and joined him. Blaze, too, was yelling and whipping.

That moment of hesitation passed. Now wild yells rang from the hills, shots fired in the air. The band thundered off in a mad run, riders, white from head to foot with thick dust, racing after it, urging it ever faster. The pace was terrific—the roar of running hoofs. Blaze glanced back. He could see little puffs of white smoke among the men behind, but he could not hear the shots above the roar of hoofs.

"Faster! Faster!" he yelled.

A mile at furious speed. Blaze glanced back. Those nine riders were coming closer; they had cut down the distance by a third.

"Drop the slow ones out!"

Fully a fifth of the band was allowed to fall back. The rest thundered on. Now, from those left, a horse was dropping back, staggering queerly in a circle, blindly. A chance shot from behind had struck it; they were coming within pistol range.

Roaring over a divide again. Not three miles to the river—but it might as well have been a thousand. Dust kicked up beside Blaze's horse. He glanced back. Those nine grim riders were sweeping up on him as surely as death itself. If he were only mounted on Blackbird! But no, he couldn't run off and leave his men.

Slim, his face pasty, was swinging close to him.

"Keep 'em goin', pahtneh; I'm goin' to try to stop 'em."

Slim was whirling his mount.

"No—Slim, come back!" shouted Blaze wildly after him; they might run from the Texas Rangers, but they dared not fight them.

But Slim did not seem to hear. Crouched low over his saddle horn, he was dashing back straight at the nine men who were now so close.

To be continued in next week's issue.

The Round-Up

FOLKS, here's a question that we'd give a lot to have you help us answer. Obviously, every editor is doing his everlasting prettiest to please his readers. In proportion as he pleases his readers, so is an editor successful. Quite apart from any moneyed success that we may have in life, there is, as you know, a real free-gratis success, a feeling within us that makes us even happier than the getting of money. Of course, we've all got to get the money if we want to live, have something to eat, and a place to sleep. While getting money gives us satisfaction and pleasure, it can't remotely give us that exalted feeling that comes to us with the knowledge that we have done a good job.

Now, folks, as we have often told you, an editor sits off in his little office, sending forth magazines to every city, hamlet, village, and town. So small a fraction of the readers write the editor as to how they like his magazine, that the only way he can really tell is by checking sales. At best this is not a very satisfactory method to the editor. What he wants to do is to be in close touch with his readers, with his customers, in other words.

To get back to our saying that we were going to ask you a question, and that we wanted an answer, the question is this: Which of our departments do you like the best? Are there any of these departments you would rather we didn't run, and devote the pages that they take up to stories? You see, it's this way. An editor is allowed so many pages. His problem is to make those pages as interesting as possible. It isn't at all a question of what he wants to put on these pages, but what the readers want him to put on these pages. Now, if the majority of you would rather in some cases have, as we have suggested, two more pages of fiction than one of the departments, we wish you'd say so, for, if that's the case, the pages will be devoted to fiction and not to the departments. We hope it is not too much to ask you to help us to give you even greater pleasure by stating your wants, your likes and dislikes. Praise is sweet, and we like to get it; it cheers us up. But constructive

criticism, while not so elevating to the spirits and encouraging, is really more helpful.

As if in answer to our prayer of June 23rd for letters from readers, telling us when they started to read Western Story Magazine, this one from William J. Sibley, of 1714 Hollins Street, Baltimore, Maryland, has just been handed us. We'll read it to you:

"Dear Boss and Folks: In this week's issue, dated June 23rd, I found something I don't quite understand. What do you mean when you say that Western Story Magazine started fifteen years ago? I have been taking the magazine for I don't know how many years, but when I first started to take it, I only paid ten cents for it. Judge for yourself.

"This is the first time I ever wrote to the Round-up, but I can't feel that I have been reading the magazine for only fifteen years—it has become so much a part of my life. In all the time I have been reading the magazine, I never missed one issue."

William J. Sibley, you've only been reading the magazine for fifteen years. Like most of us, you've just lost track of time. It no doubt seems to you as if you'd always been reading it, just as with lots of things that you have been long and regularly accustomed to doing. They have become so much a part of you and of your life that it seems, until you check up on it, you've been doing them from birth.

We are glad to meet you through your letter, Bill Sibley; wish that you had written us before. We thank you for your letter. It genuinely thrills us to know that you've never missed an issue in all the years that you have been reading Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine. May you live long and prosper, and may you read Western Story Magazine as long as you live! Because you read the magazine, it makes us kin—fellows together, you and your old "Boss," the editor.

In Next Week's Issue

A Complete Novel

LAND OF FURY

By STUART HARDY

Journeying in strange country, Cliff Fraser fights a one-man war against a band of desperadoes.

CHECHAHCO PARTNER

By KENNETH GILBERT

A thrilling tale of the stampede on Klunok Creek—concerning the Siwash Kid, a young chechahco with nerve, and Joe Brill, who boasted that a bolt-action gun was all the partner he ever needed.

Also Features by

Jay Lucas H. Fredric Young

And Others

15c a Copy At All News Stands

MINES AND MINING

By J. A. THOMPSON

This department is intended to be of real help to readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be answered in this department in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

DIVING for gold is not so fantastic an idea as it may sound. It's been done out in some of the larger streams in California's rich gold country. Dave Clark had this modern type of underwater prospecting in mind when he wrote in from Evanston, Illinois, asking for information on the subject.

"Have heard about certain outfits diving in the California rivers in search of rich gold pockets or gold-filled crevices, and the idea is one I would like to try out in the near future. Anything you can tell me about this form of gold prospecting will be much appreciated, Mr. Thompson. And my thanks to you, and that good old favorite—Western Story."

We like, wherever possible, to stick to strictly first-hand information in the Mines and Mining Department. Personally we have never cruised along the bottom of a big river—that is not while the water was still in it—looking for yellow metal.

But a friend of ours has. He's Collis P. Kraus, who, when he's home, hangs his hat in the Bronx, New York City. Kraus has done considerable diving for gold. So we up and asked him to pinch hit for us and give Dave some real first-hand advice on this deep (water) subject. Which same, Kraus says he was mighty glad to do, being a long-time Western Story Magazine reader himself, and always ready to help other Western Story readers anywhere, or any way he can. Right now he has some interesting remarks to make from personal experience in donning a diving helmet and plunging off the deep end in search of under-water gold.

"I've got the gold fever bad," says Kraus. "You never lose it once you've seen colors, and I always wanted to try prospecting under water. My first trip was to the mouth of Hazel Creek where it empties into the Sacramento

River at Sims Station in Siskiyou County, California. I wanted to explore the river bed, thinking I could find bed rock exposed at some spot where I could clean up a rich crevice or pothole.

"None of our outfit had ever been in a diving suit, but I read a lot about the subject, and got some pointers from two professional divers in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Then I went to A. Schraders Sons, Inc., and bought a lightweight air pump, two rubber dresses, one hundred and fifty feet of air hose, helmet, iron sandals, lead belt weights, and other necessary equipment and had it shipped out to Redding, California.

"We drove out to the coast from New York, picked up camp and prospecting outfit at Oakland, bought a sixteen-foot rowboat, and eventually arrived at the river at Sims Station—and were faced with a change of partners, as two of the tenderfeet got cold feet right there. Got new partners, built a raft, bolted a heavy ladder over the side, fastened the air pump amidships, got a cable to anchor by, moved the raft across the river about one and one half miles north of Redding.

"Then I made my first dive, but was unable to get to bed rock due to large amount of overburden, sand, boulders, et cetera. One partner worked the air pump, while the other tended my life line and air hose. When I reached a spot where I could dig and send up samples in a bucket, my tender would snub the line and then pull up the bucket of gravel. No luck there in the Sacramento River, which shows how far from bed rock I must have been for I could come to the surface, row ashore, and pan colors of gold at the water's edge.

"I am an old railroad man myself, used to fire on the S. P. along the Sacramento. My partner, who handled my lines while I was diving, was an ex-railroad conductor, and we worked mostly by railroad signals. Though I have lost his address, I still have a feeling in my heart for him. He was a real man.

"That first trip wasn't too successful, but I soon made another try with Ray Rossman, my old partner and tender. From Folsom we went eleven miles up the South Fork of the American River, where I had a spot in mind. I crawled and walked out into the river, cleaning a crevice from the water edge downward. The first bucketful panned gold. Overburden licked me deeper down. I would have needed a clamshell and crane to get to bed rock in the center of the river.

"We moved again, up into Trinity County to Redding and west of there via Weaverville, Whiskytown, Old Shasta, and other famous mining camps, and finally pulled into Gray's Camp. I looked the 'big hole' over and caught a fine salmon which we cooked for supper.

"We got color there, but the same old story—overburden—balked us out of a bonanza. But we were in gold country, all right. I still think there is untold riches on the bed rock of those rivers. Some day I'll be going back—soon, maybe. I'd like to."

This adventurous gold diver has kept a diary of his trips, together with an expense account, cost of diving gear, et cetera, and has generously told us that if he can be of any further help or assistance to interested Western Story readers, he wants you fellows just to call on him. Address Collis P. Kraus, care of the Mines And Mining Department, Western Story Magazine, and we'll promptly forward your letters.

The HOLLOW TREE

Conducted by HELEN RIVERS

It is a natural impulse and it is a good impulse to desire to wander and to roam. Not too much, of course. But the desire to go places and see things should be and is in all of us—in all of us who amount to anything, at least, for traveling educates us, and changing our geographic location often is of great benefit to health, mind, and economic well-being. A wise man once said, "A rolling stone gathers no moss," but a wiser man, we think, added, "but a standing pool stagnates."

If you are one who would travel, it is a mighty good thing to have man's best asset along the way, and at your destination. We mean, of course, friends.

If you would like a friend or friends in a certain section, write to Miss Helen Rivers, who conducts this department, and she will put you in touch with readers who want to correspond with folks in your part of the world.

It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

Address: Helen Rivers, care The Hollow Tree, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N.Y.

THERE is plenty of good open range land in the Longhorn State—Texas. "Waddy of the Diamond C" can tell you-all about rounding up wild broncs on the Texas plains.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I live in the southeastern part of Texas. Part of this country is range land—plains—and part is heavily wooded. I am a "hand" on my father's ranch. Our outfit has handled over eight hundred head of wild prairie horses since I've been a hand on the Diamond C. We build corrals seven feet high out of pine poles and then put barbed-wire "wings" on them. In other words we extend a heavy barbed-wire fence straight out from the gate of the corral for two or three miles. Then on the other side of the gate we extend another fence nearly parallel but gradually widening for about one hundred and fifty yards. Then we flare it out and make it spread wide from the other fence, making the outline of a funnel emptying into the corral or catch pen.

We run the wild horses with dogs, as most of the country is heavily wooded. We use hounds to start the horses with, but when we get the horses close to the pen, we have a waddy stationed there with cur dogs, and the cur dogs run the horses into the pen. You see, the hounds can run longer, but the cur dogs run faster. With the cur dogs close to the horses' heels

the horses do not pay so much attention to where they are going and are in the pen before they know it. We then rope them and carry them to a pasture with a fence heavy enough so that they can't jump out. When sixty or seventy head are corralled, we drive them north into east Texas, which is a farming country, and sell them for plow horses. We charge extra, of course, to "break" them. In the spring of the year they are poor and can't be driven far. Let me say right here that we do not feed cattle or horses in this country—except our saddle horses that we ride during the winter.

Our outfit consists of myself and three riders. We each have a string of four horses that we are each responsible for. We ride small cow ponies weighing six hundred and fifty to seven hundred and fifty pounds. They are small enough so that when we bend low, our heads just touch the big limb of most trees.

Right now we are on my father's ranch, helping round up and brand. He has just bought more cattle, and we have to watch them close to keep them from going back to their home range. If we keep them here for a few months, they will then stay. We handle Texas longhorn cattle and have Brahma bulls. You see the Brahma is immune to Texas tick fever. A Brahma calf three months old can outrun a fast horse, and they are as wild as deer. Sometimes they do not see a man until they are several months old, and they may never see a fence till they are a year old. Then they are very hard to handle.

I suppose some of you folks are curious to know what kind of wearing apparel we have down here. We wear heavy canvas coats and leather chaps. We wear hooded stirrups and also high-heeled boots and spurs. We use rawhide or linen lariats. We wear big ten-gallon hats to keep the sun off, and when we ride through brush we throw our heads down and the brim of the hat flops down and protects our face and ears. A string under our chin and through the brim keeps it on our head.

There is a good bit of rustling going on hereabouts so we have to wear rifles or pistols. A rifle is hung from the rigging rings on the near side in a scabbard. A pistol is in a holster on our right hip with the lower end tied with buckskin around our leg to keep it in place.

And now a word about the "dogies." We run our cattle through dipping vats about every two months. A vat is a trench, cemented in so as to hold water. It is twenty-six to thirty-two feet long, three to four feet wide, and seven or eight feet deep. A narrow chute runs up to it, and we push the cattle into the water. They swim about six or eight feet and then strike slanting steps and walk up them and out. The water is mixed with creosote and kills all the ticks, et cetera. Often, in dipping cattle, we have to turn a steer's head sidewise and pull him through, because of the facts that his horns are over four feet wide.

We have rodeos each Sunday. We ride steers and break horses. We use the loose rope and surcingle on steers. We use these and a saddle on horses. We have to ride them out before being picked up. And a man had much rather get thrown than to "pull leather," or hold on when riding a saddle. We often do this to a steer: put a loose rope on him. One man gets on his neck between his shoulders and head and faces backward, holding to the rope. Then another gets on the steer's hips, facing forward. He reaches back and pulls the steer's tail over his shoulder and stays on that way.

Well, folks, we are sixteen miles from town, and mail sure is welcome.

WADDY OF THE DIAMOND C.

Care of The Tree.

Waddy of the Diamond C can tell you folks about the cattle spreads of Texas. Wear your friend-maker membership badges, folks, and speak up to this Texan.

Twenty-five cents in coin or stamps sent to The Hollow Tree Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring you either the pin style or the button for the coat lapel. In ordering, be sure to state which you wish.

An Iowa woman would like to correspond with Western ladies.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a widow of forty, and I want to go West this summer. I would like to hear from some one who could tell me about the country, and what chance there would be for work for a woman. Any

one, old or young, who writes me will get an answer pronto. I can tell any one all about the Corn Belt, as I have lived here all my life. IOWA MRS.

Care of The Tree.

This hombre "wants West" again.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I have been in Florida for a number of years but I am homesick to get back to the Western country. I will thank the old Holla to get me in touch with some one in New Mexico, Arizona, and in the vicinity of Marshfield, Oregon, who can inform me about government land where a little diversified farming may be done, and possibly fairly close to mining possibilities. Thank you, folks, for any favors.

CHARLES H. X. DAVIS.

3006 Moffet Avenue, Tampa, Florida.

Beulah is looking for a Pal who will trek the Western trails with her.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am interested in locating and corresponding with a girl of about my own age, which is twenty, who lives somewhere near my home town—Elkhart, Indiana—and who has a desire to travel and travel "light" through the Western States.

Any one interested please write to me right pronto. BEULAH.

Care of The Tree.

Here's a rambler who can talk of many things.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

Here's a happy-go-lucky rambler who can tell stories of many trails. I've been skipper of a yacht, in and around the port of Los Angeles; I've seen figs as big as your fist, and grapes, apples, peaches, and pears growing in a little oasis less than fifty miles from Death Valley, up on the Mojave Desert. And I've talked with Death Valley Scotty. I've been in the logging camps of Grants Pass, Oregon. I've seen Indians fishing on the Columbia River. I've seen the Mexican army on parade. I've been to Tiajuana, Caliente, and Mexicale. I've been in earthquakes in California, and floods in Tennessee, and oil booms in Texas! And, oh, yes! I've played in a few pictures—just atmosphere!

Well, let's hear from you-all. I'll be waiting. HARRY LEE.

Care of Placerita Café,
Newhall, California.

From West Virginia comes a hillbilly.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I'm just a red-headed mountaineer musician, nineteen years old, and a high-school graduate. I live in the panhandle of West Virginia. I can give considerable amusing data on West Virginia and Ohio. I'd like to swap music, relics, collections, or anything for everything. I will trade snaps and will answer all letters. I'm interested in anything and everything.

EUGENE LEROY FLETCHER.

509 Mahan Avenue,
Follansbee, West Virginia.

Bob is inviting you-all to speak up pronto.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am twenty-three years of age, interested in every topic of conversation from Iron Age sports to Machine Age vogues and business! I particularly love Western sports, like the out-of-doors, and like to chat with the old prospectors. Please, folks, hurry some answers. I shall offer punctuality and the best of my journalism!

BOB WAXMAN.

3442 Hallwood Place, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Stamp collectors, please take notice.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I'm a young fellow of seventeen, and interested in the hobby of collecting stamps. Precancelled United States stamps are preferred, although I save all kinds. I will answer all letters and trade stamps with those who will answer.

WARREN HAMILTON.

4316 West Wilcox Street,
Chicago, Illinois.

A couple of hombres are rounding up some Pen Pals.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

We are two pals—lonesome for our native West. We lived on neighboring ranches between Cheyenne and Laramie, Wyoming, and came here to Wisconsin five years ago, to work. No one can guess how lonesome and homesick we are for the mountains or for a friendly letter from some Western ranchers or cowboys. We'll answer all. PAT AND BOB.

Care of R. H. Williams, Box 344,
Hayward, Wisconsin.

WHERE TO GO And How to GET THERE

By JOHN NORTH

We aim in this department to give practical help to readers. The service offered includes accurate information about the West, its ranches, mines, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. We will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to us, for we are always glad to assist you to the best of our ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

A NEW industry is being established out in the Pacific Northwest in the raising of Angora rabbits. These little animals produce both wool and meat, and already some one thousand eight hundred growers of them are doing business in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. Having heard some interesting rumors about this industry, Ruth B., of Butte, Montana, is asking for more facts.

"My husband and I are leaving soon for Washington where we are going to live on a small farm. My husband expects to raise poultry, have a market garden, and perhaps go in for fruit growing in a limited way. Recently I have heard that Angora rabbits are being raised for profit in the Pacific Northwest and I'd like to see what I can do along this line. I'm young and energetic and should like to add to the family income if I can. Being fond of the outdoors, used to hard work, and successful with pets, I think I might make a go of this undertaking. Any tips from you will be welcome."

We take off our five-gallon hat to you, Mrs. Ruth B., and indorse your

plan as both an ingenious and a promising one. Nor can we see any reason why you should not make a howling success of it. Angora-rabbit raising will fit in wonderfully well with your husband's program and should provide an interesting outlet for that surplus energy you speak of.

As you've had no experience along this line, however, we'd suggest that you start in on a small scale and enlarge your enterprise as your knowledge of it increases. Probably twenty-five rabbits would be enough for a beginning, although some farmers out that way have as many as two hundred and fifty. As you like the outdoors and pets, I predict that you'll pick up the tricks of the trade very quickly. And now for those tips you request.

For the first three months the young rabbits are permitted to run free and from then on they are shut up in hutches, each rabbit having a small compartment about two feet square, and these are built in rows several tiers high. Water cans and small feed troughs are accessible from both outside and inside. Various ingenious ways of ventilating the hutches and keeping them clean and odorless have been devised. Angoras generally are good for four or five years' service as woolers.

One farmer who recently built a one-thousand-hutch plant at Olympia, Washington, estimated that it cost him about fifty cents per hutch.

When you reach the point of having several hundred rabbits, you'll find that it is just about a complete job for one person to keep everything clean, prepare the rations, and do the feeding, look after the wool, and take care of the other tasks that come up from time to time. However, little of it is heavy work.

When rabbits are kept clean, a yield of seventy to eighty per cent of No. 1 wool is obtained. It must be two inches long to qualify. Rabbits are clipped every three months with scissors, and the better growers get twelve ounces of wool a year from average animals in four clippings. One person can clip from four to six rabbits an hour and maintain that pace all day. If you buy all the rations for your rabbits, except green feed, it costs one dollar and twenty-five cents to keep a rabbit a year. About ten per cent of the stock is usually kept for breeders and the remainder as straight woolers. Two litters a year are the usual practice, saving five rabbits to the litter.

At times there is a market for breeders, and the average price for a dozen good breeding Angoras—ten does and two bucks—is one hundred and fifty dollars. When sold as woolers and not for breeding, they bring about three dollars each. Sur-

SPECIAL NOTICE

INDIAN WELLS VALLEY OF CALIFORNIA

Out in Kern County, California, lies the Indian Wells Valley, a region twenty miles long and from fifteen to eighteen miles wide. To the west tower the high Sierra Nevada Mountains while to the north and east lie the mineralized Argus Mountains. The El Paso range forms the southern border. With a healthful climate, good opportunities for farming, and facilities for hunting and fishing, this region invites the man who wants to live and work in the outdoor West. For an address from which a descriptive pamphlet of the Indian Wells Valley may be procured, write John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine.

plus stock may also be sold for meat at twenty-five cents a pound. Here's success to Mrs. Ruth B.'s new venture.

Angora rabbits producing both wool and meat are the basis of a new industry in the Northwest. If you would like additional information on this subject, write John North for an address from which it may be obtained.

Another reader bound for the Northwest is Ray R., of Louisville, Kentucky.

"For years I've dreamed of visiting the West, Mr. North, and this summer my dream is really coming true, for I'm off soon for the Rocky Mountains. I expect to visit Glacier National Park and also the Waterton Lakes National Park in the Canadian Rockies. As a tenderfoot I'm asking for your advice as to what clothing one should take along for the Western mountain country."

We like to do our part toward making dreams come true, and so we are mighty pleased to give Ray a list of the clothing he should take along for the Western mountain country. Such a list consists of the following: Soft felt hat, sheepskin-lined canvas coat, buckskin shirt, wool vest, drab army flannel shirt, wool-texture trousers with cowhide or leather chaps, slicker or poncho, cowboy boots, or, for mountain work, hunting boots with screw calks in soles, or cruiser moccasins with calks, two pair wool socks, spurs, lariat, leather riding gloves, bandanna.

Well, some hombres prefer the mountains of the West, but Morris P., of St. Paul, Minnesota, votes for a valley.

"I'm looking for a Western valley with a mild climate, Mr. North, as I've been advised by my doctor to get out into the open. What I've heard of Indian Wells Valley out in California sounds mighty hopeful to me, but I'd like some more information. Would this valley be a good location to grow alfalfa, and what does land cost out that way?"

You'd search a long time before you'd find a better spot than the Indian Wells Valley, Morris, as to climate, and alfalfa is the principal crop of that section. It is cut from five to eight times each season, the first crop being harvested in March and the last in November. The yield is from one to two tons per acre each cutting.

The cost of land depends upon the location and improvements. Unimproved raw land that will produce eight to fourteen tons of alfalfa per acre per annum, with a water lift of forty to seventy-five feet, can be bought as low as twenty-five to fifty dollars per acre.

Scattered through the Rocky Mountains are many guest ranches, which offer to their visitors the free and easy camaraderie of the West. Or if one wishes to trek far up into the hills, he may pitch his tent under a tree and explore the little-known regions of the Rockies. For a list of Rocky Mountain ranches, and for information about the proper camping equipment for a mountain trip, write John North, in care of this magazine.

A Thrilling Novel, "LAND OF FURY," by STUART HARDY, in Next Week's Issue.

GUNS AND GUNNERS

By CHARLES E. CHAPEL

Lieutenant, U. S. Marine Corps

The foremost authorities on ballistics and the principal firearms manufacturers are coöperating to make this department a success. We shall be glad to answer any letters regarding firearms if accompanied by a stamped and addressed envelope. Address your letters to Lieutenant Charles E. Chapel, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WET cartridges cause the bullets to strike high, according to some experts. The theory is that the cartridge case when wet or oily does not fit so closely against the walls of the chamber, thus allowing the powder gas to pass backward and strike against the face of the rifle bolt. This is thought to set up vibrations in the rifle and cause the shooter to aim high.

Experience coaching men of different temperament and experience has shown that the differences of heat and light and wind are seldom as great as the shooter's own variations of position, aim, and trigger squeeze. It is natural for us all to seek an alibi for our own shortcomings; marksmen are no exception to this rule. Climatic conditions have their part in the program, but the sharpshooter who overcomes them instead of hiding behind them is the one who goes to the national matches.

A beginner does not need an expensive rifle; usually his target hits are a fair reflection of his ability. This is not so true of a revolver or pistol, for those are small weapons, easily thrown out of line by the slightest tremor in the shooter's arm. If the trigger squeeze of a hand gun is slow and "mushy," he may jerk just when he should continue the gradual increase of pressure. The remedy is a trip to a gunsmith for trigger adjustment.

Black-powder speed.

C. N. Bose, Hartford, Connecticut: Speed of burning of gunpowder is dependent on the size of the grains. Large grains burn slower than small grains. Large grains are harder to ignite than small grains. The exception is dustlike powder which is hard to ignite and burn because there are no spaces between grains.

Makers of loading tools.

A. C. Lawson, Rock Springs, Wyoming: There are several reliable makers of loading tools. Three of the largest are: Bond Manufacturing Corporation, Fifth and Monroe Streets, Wilmington, Delaware; Lyman Gun Sight Corporation, Middlefield, Connecticut; and Belding & Mull, Philipsburg, Pennsylvania. They make bullet molds, gravity measures, and assembling tools.

Economy in practice.

O. N. Brown, Ponca, Oklahoma: You can economize in rifle or pistol practice by reloading your own ammunition, by joining a club that buys ammunition in wholesale lots, by firing a small-caliber weapon, or by joining the national guard, naval reserve, or other branch of military or naval service offering government arms and ammunition for your instruction.

What makes bullet move.

J. F. Lincoln, Dyersville, Iowa: Gunpowder when ignited gives forth gas which occupies many times the volume filled by the parent powder. It is this expansive property of gunpowder that makes things move. In a gun, force is exerted in every direction by the gas, but the bullet offers the least resistance and therefore takes the push.

How gunpowder works.

K. S. Downes, East Palestine, Ohio: Sulphur and charcoal when mixed and ignited will burn as long as air is supplied; to make an explosive we add saltpeter which is rich in oxygen and supplies this element when heated, and enables us to burn the sulphur and charcoal in a closed tube which has no air inlet. As soon as enough gas has been given forth by the burning, we have an explosion that could not take place in open air.

Clay-bird backstop.

George T. Edmonds, Duryea, Pennsylvania: A good backstop for a trap-gun or "skeet" club consists of 1½-inch chicken-wire mesh placed about fifty feet behind each trap house to catch the unbroken clay disks. A net about twenty-five feet square sloping upward away from the trap house is correct.

Peters's and Colt's have resumed sending free booklets to our readers. If you have not received these interesting pamphlets, write us now, and we will put your name on the mailing list.

The government supply of Krag and Russian rifles is exhausted, but the U. S. Rifle (Enfield), Model 1917, Caliber .30, is sold to *citizens of the United States* for $8.85, under certain restrictions which will be explained to readers who send us a stamped and addressed envelope.

MISSING

This department is offered free of charge to our readers. Its purpose is to aid them in getting in touch with persons of whom they have lost track.

While it will be better to use your name in the notice, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

Now, readers, help those whose friends or relatives are missing, as you would like to be helped if you were in a similar position.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to any one who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

HOLLAND or **HUFF, NONA.**—It is very important and to her best interests that she get in touch with me at once. Any one knowing where she is now located, please advise Margaret Currie, Apartment 2, 2626 Austin Avenue, Houston, Texas.

POTTS, CHARLEY L.—Would be about forty-two years of age. His son is anxious to hear from him. Address Jess W. Potts, Cresford, South Dakota.

HALL, THOMAS CHARLES.—It is possible that his second name is Samuel. He is my father, and due to my traveling rather widely in 1928 I lost track of him. I only know that in the spring of 1929 he left Alberta, Canada, presumably for either Iowa or Kansas. He is about seventy years of age and probably in good health. Is six feet tall and weighed two hundred and forty pounds. It is probable that he is engaged in the merchandise business somewhere. As my father is getting on in years, I am very anxious to locate him as soon as possible. Should he need help, I am in a position to give it. Any one having any possible information concerning him, please communicate immediately with Charles R. Hall, Box 491, Kirkland Lake, Ontario, Canada.

NOTICE.—To my pals who were with me in South America. Does three to ten ounces look good to you? If so, write at once. I will have boat ready to go as soon as you are. R. Fullenwider, Orland, California.

PROVO, TOM.—Was last heard of in Brooklyn, New York. Any one knowing his present whereabouts, please write to M. B., 1096 Willow Street, Beaumont, Texas.

BRANTLY, PINKY.—Who left for Chicago, Illinois, in 1927. Have lots to tell you. Write to me some time. M. B., 1096 Willow Street, Beaumont Texas.

DOUGHERTY, JIMMIE and **MARGARET.**—In 1925 they were living at 11½ West Eighty-fourth Street, New York City. Have lost track of them since then. Margaret came from Rushville, Indiana. Her maiden name was Innis. Jimmie's home was in Elizabeth, New Jersey. I believe that they came to New York from Cleveland, Ohio, in the fall of 1924, traveling by auto. Any news as to their whereabouts would be much appreciated by Lydia Manning, 1665 Jonathan Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio.

PERCY, or **FREEDBURG, WILLIAM R.**—In 1870 he was a member of the band in the Seventeenth U. S. Infantry. When last heard from he was stationed in Dakota Territory. He is my uncle, and I would be happy to hear from him or any of his relatives. Kindly address Mrs. M. E. Richardson, 265 Cotton Avenue, Scarboro Junction P. O., Ontario, Canada.

ATTENTION.—Seven miles west of Lincoln, Kansas, the body of an unidentified man was found in a trash heap. Had been dead about two and a half years. Death was the result of violence; skull had been crushed. Man was about thirty-five years of age. Height was probably five feet six or eight inches. Hair was reddish-blond. Teeth were worn. Had one crown on first molar on left side with a twin soldered on, making one tooth missing from the upper jaw. His clothes were of winter weight. A voltmeter was found in his overalls pocket. Any one knowing of any missing person whose description is similar to this, please notify the coroner, Dr. B. F. Spencer, Lincoln, Kansas.

WAHLES, JOHN.—Was born April 20, 1860, at Ottersburg, Germany. Emigrated to the United States from Liverpool, England, about fifty years ago. A sister of his is asking the readers for any possible news of him. She never heard from him again after he left England. Please address any information to Mrs. Gus Roemer, 138 Akron Street, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada.

NELSON or **NIELSON, HERMAN.**—Was last seen in Meadville, Pennsylvania, in April, 1933. He is about thirty-five years of age. A tooth is missing from the left side of his mouth in front. Between right eye and ear is a large dark mole. Have good news for him. Must find him soon. Any one able to help in locating him, please get in touch with P. Braymer, 347½ Poplar Street, Meadville, Pennsylvania.

PROUT, WILLIAM.—Would like to secure the names and addresses of any descendants of the aforenamed. In 1791 he, with other citizens, donated several parcels of land to the government. The city of Washington, D. C., is built on this land. Kindly address all communications to M. E. P., care of Western Story Magazine.

HARRY J.—Laddie, want to hear from you so much. Please write to Nita, care of Western Story Magazine.

DOROTHY.—Your mother and Aunt Pearl and her family would love to hear from you or see you. Address 15 Coventry Avenue, Yorkville, New York, or care of this magazine.

RICHARDSON, LOUIS ALLEN.—Twenty-seven years ago he left my mother and four children in eastern Wyoming. At that time he had light-brown hair and gray eyes. Complexion was sandy. Weighed one hundred and fifty pounds and was six feet tall. He would be between fifty-four and fifty-five years of age now. It is very possible that he is using an assumed name. Want very much to locate him and would appreciate any assistance offered. Address C. A. Richardson, Hitchcock, South Dakota.

GREEN, DOYLE J.—Would like to hear from you. Why did you leave me without a word, and why have you never come back? I am sorry that I got a divorce after you left. It was the result of urging on the part of dad and Henry A. I married Gieselhart, hoping to make a home for Buddie. But he mistreated us both, and it was impossible to live with him. Don't worry about your getting in trouble because of failure to support your child. The warrant dad had out for you was void after his death. I have enough from dad's estate and am not in want any more. I still love you and wish that we could at least meet. Are you married? I hope not. I'm with mother now in Wisconsin. Please, if you see this, write to me. This man is five feet eight or nine inches tall and he weighed about one hundred and seventy pounds. Is very well-built. Hair is black and eyes are dark-brown. Is usually well-dressed. Has nice manners. Was twenty-six years of age on July 25, 1934. He used to live at Bertha, Minnesota, and has relatives in Indiana. Any one knowing his whereabouts, kindly address Mrs. Martha Green Gieselhart, Route 2, Box 78, Luck, Wisconsin.

BOLT, CLARENCE.—When last heard from he was in the army at Camp Pike, Arkansas, just after the World War. He has dark-brown hair and is about five feet nine inches tall. Any one knowing his present address, please notify Jerry Bolt, 129 Eighth Street, Valley Junction, Iowa.

FRAZIER, MRS. ROLAND.—She was last heard of when living in Fort Worth, Texas. That was in 1927. Relatives of hers live in Hillsboro, Texas. Have tried to locate her through them, but have not been successful. She is an old friend, and I would like very much to get in touch with her again. Please send any information to Mrs. Willie Shahan, 241 Cornieta Street, Bellflower, California.

NOTICE.—Want to get in touch with the children or other descendants of Frank Bennett. Mr. Bennett was my mother's uncle. Fifty years ago he was a foreman cooper employed in the Fleischmann Distilleries. In 1914 friends of his in Peekskill, New York, told me that he had died four years before, and that Mrs. Bennett had passed away shortly afterward. There are two daughters, one about thirty, and the other around forty years of age. The younger one married and went to live in Boston, Massachusetts. The elder later married a man named Wittler, of New York City. In 1919 she was staying at the Plaza Hotel in New York City. Since then I know nothing of them. Mother died two years ago. Before her death she made me promise to find my uncle's family if possible. If any of the readers can offer any information concerning them, kindly address Thomas McGarry, or Rose McGarry, 242 Beaufort Street, Liverpool, England.

WRIGHT, JESSE.—Has brown hair and blue eyes. Is twenty-five years of age. Has a gold crown on tooth next to front teeth. Is five feet eleven inches tall and weighed one hundred and forty-five pounds. The folks are much worried about you. Write to your brother, Manuel Wright, South Cle Clum, Washington.

MAUD, JAMES R.—Will any one who knows Jimmie, please write to me? Was at one time mate on the U. S. S. "Steelmaker." He was last heard from in California in 1930. Address Bessie Meeker, 1153 Nanticoke Street, Baltimore, Maryland.

KELLEY, N. D.—Was last heard from about 1928, in Kingston, Ontario. She arrived in Canada just after the War. Is believed to have two children. Will any of the readers who can give any possible information concerning her, please communicate with R. K. Stephensen, 18 Lindley Street, Acomb Road, Holgate, York, England?

SHANNON, MARION and MARY.—Of Quincy, Illinois. When last heard from they were living at 119 North Neil Street, Champaign, Illinois. Any one knowing their present address, please advise Ray Cassiday, 6234 Dorchester Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

HARVEY, BILL.—Of Des Moines, Iowa. His last known address was Anamosa, Iowa. Any one knowing his whereabouts, kindly write to Ray Cassiday, 6234 Dorchester Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

PARMENTIER, HENRY.—Of French birth. Would be fifty-two years of age. In 1914 he lived in Canada. In 1916 he lived in Pensacola, Florida. He has brown hair and brown eyes. Is five feet ten inches tall and weighed one hundred and forty pounds. Kindly send any information concerning him to A. Coquin, 1233 Madina Street, San Mateo, California.

MILLER, FRANK, HENRY JOHN, and JACK.—Frank is my father. He would be between sixty and sixty-five years of age and was a railroad engineer. At one time he worked for the Northern Pacific Railway Co. I have not seen my father since 1913, when we all lived in Missoula, Montana. Jack is about thirty-two years of age. He is my half brother. Henry John is twenty-eight years old. He was in the U. S. navy for four years and stationed on the U. S. S. "West Virginia." It is years since I have had any news of him or from him. I was born in Spring City, Tennessee, June 5, 1908. Any information regarding any of the aforenamed would be gratefully received by Mrs. Mabel Belle Hughes, 408 North Sarah Street, St. Louis, Missouri.

ADDISON, ERMA, ERNEST, PEARL, and VIRGIE.—Their father was Frank Addison. Their mother's maiden name was Mattie Poston. Frank died in 1906 and is buried at Heldon. His widow was married again to a man named Lewis. Later she died, and Ernest, Pearl, and Virgie went to live on a farm. Erma was married at that time. Their grandfather is anxious for some news of them. Any one knowing the whereabouts of any of these persons, kindly notify W. M. Addison, care of Ed Addison, Megargel, Texas.

NOTICE.—I was adopted from St. Joseph's Infant Asylum in Cincinnati, Ohio, by Mr. and Mrs. John Kellar. Before my adoption my name was Grace Brooker. I long to know something of my own mother. My foster mother and I have tried to locate her in many ways, but so far we have been unsuccessful. Any one knowing anything of the circumstances of my birth, or knowing any persons named Brooker, please write to Grace Margaret Keller, Latonia, Kentucky.

LEONARD.—Agnes is in sanitorium and Dickie is with me. I need your help at once. Write. Lucy, Medford, Massachusetts.

DITMON, DOROTHY IRENE, and MILDRED HARRIET.—Both these girls were taken in adoption from the Illinois Soldiers Orphans Home, Normal, Illinois. The younger, Mildred Harriet, was adopted in March, 1925. She was four years old at the time. She had blond hair and blue eyes. Her birthday is March 4th. Dorothy Irene was seventeen years of age on August 21, 1934. She had dark-brown curly hair and brown eyes. Their mother would be very happy to hear from, or of, them. Kindly address Mrs. Elsie Engman, 470 McMillan Avenue, Aurora, Illinois.

MURRY, RILEY W.—Who disappeared during the beginning of the Spanish-American War, while the government was calling for vlounteers. Was last heard from when in the State of Georgia. If living he would be about fifty-two years of age. I am his sister, and I would greatly appreciate hearing from any one who may have any later news of him. Address Mrs. Maggie Murry Ellis, Furman, South Carolina.

LOUGHNEY, JOHN EDGAR.—He left home on May 26, 1934. He is five feet three inches tall. Has blue eyes and sandy hair. Weighs about one hundred and seventy pounds. Usually goes by the name of Jack. Any one knowing his whereabouts, please notify his wife, Mrs. Lily Loughney, 397 South Martha Avenue, East Akron, Ohio.

YOUNG, WILLIAM.—He left Brechin, Scotland, more than twenty years ago, going from there to Australia. He has not been heard from since. Any information regarding him would be deeply appreciated by his brother, Benjamin B. Young, 44 Parkview Street, Springfield, Massachusetts.

BUTCHER, HARLEY H.—Of Crawfordsville, Indiana. He left there in the autumn of 1919 going to California, where he joined the navy and was stationed on the U. S. S. "California." He married a girl named Regina, but I do not know her last name. They had one daughter, Evelyn Regina, who would now be about fifteen years of age. It is thought that his wife's home was in San Francisco. He was last heard from in the winter of 1925. Any information regarding him, or his wife, or daughter would be thankfully received by his niece, Belle, who now lives in Torrance, California. Kindly address Mrs. T. F. McCoy, P. O. Box 1005, Torrance, California.

STEWART, CARRIE.—Who used to work in the drug store at Salt Creek, Wyoming. Do you remember R. L. C. who went to California and Alaska? Have tried to locate you for ten years, but have had no luck. She was last heard from in Denver. Any one knowing Miss Stewart's present address, please write to R. L. C., care of Western Story Magazine.

BIG HONEY "E. L."—I was in Aroma Park, Illinois, but I didn't see Leonard. Wrote to Jennie at La Salle, New York, but received no reply. Am now in California, but intend going to Buffalo, New York. Will see you if possible. Let me hear from you. Address C. J., care of Western Story Magazine.

CEGAL, ERNEST EVERETT.—He was born in the State of Washington on November 27, 1906. He is heir to a tract of land. Can learn something to his advantage by communicating with the undersigned. Any one knowing any persons having the name of Cegal, please notify E. Morris, 1261 Eleventh Street, San Pedro, California.

ELLIOT, EARL.—His last known address was the State of Washington. He would be about thirty-two years of age. Will he, or any one knowing his whereabouts, kindly communicate with me relative to some property to which he is heir. Address E. Morris, 1261 Eleventh Street, San Pedro, California.

REGENHARD, PALMER.—Usually called Reggie. His home is in either Richmond, Virginia, or Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Was a cadet at Annapolis in 1924. Would like to hear from him or any one knowing his present address. Address Marion J., care of Western Story Magazine.

CULPEPER.—We are of this family. Will the person who advertised for Culpepers in this magazine some time ago, please communicate with me? Address Robert Grett, Newport Beach, California.

JONTE or WALSH, FRED.—Was last in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on January 30, 1934. Is thirty-six years of age. Has large blue eyes and black curly hair. Nose is prominent. Is short and stocky, weighing one hundred and seventy-five pounds and is five feet three inches tall. Has a very pleasing personality and makes friends readily. When last seen he was driving a 1933, two-door Plymouth sedan. Have important news for him. Any information concerning his whereabouts would be greatly appreciated by Mrs. Emma G. Woodroof, 1158 Kirkland Avenue, Nashville, Tennessee.

HARRIS, ALBERT E.—Was last heard of in Oklahoma. Would like to get in touch with him at once. Any one knowing his whereabouts, kindly address G. H., care of Western Story Magazine.

WHITNEY, MATTHEW T.—He left Oregon via the coast route. It is possible that he is in Texas. Matt, your trusting pal needs you. Write or come to your Georgia friend. Any one knowing his whereabouts, please communicate with Mrs. M. Brookins, Route 2, Sandersville, Georgia.

NETTLESHIP, ARDYTHE.—When last heard from she was in either Seattle or Tacoma, Washington. Please write to your old friend, Ruth. Address Mrs. H. H. York, 37 East Eleventh Street, Eugenie, Oregon.

GREEN, REX R.—Dad is dead. Mother is living in Fort Worth, Texas. We would like to hear from you. Any one knowing his whereabouts, please advise J. B. Green, 25 South Street, New York City.

CONRAD, HULDA J.—Formerly of 62 Trinity Place, Portland, Oregon. When last heard from she was enroute from Washington, D. C. to her residence in Portland, Oregon. That was in 1929. She is of middle age. Weighs about one hundred and fifteen pounds and is five feet two inches tall. Is a brunette. Any news of her would be thankfully received by her niece, Ella Bea Murphy, Route 2, Box 49-A, Big Lake, Minnesota.

GODDARD.—Two brothers who came originally from Yorkshire, England, and who left their home in Chicago, Illinois, nearly half a century ago. They are the brothers of Mary Elizabeth and Susan Goddard. A granddaughter of Mary would like to locate them or any of their descendants. Kindly send any information concerning them to Mrs. Ella Bea Murphy, Route 2, Box 49-A, Big Lake, Minnesota.

WEBSTER, PAUL.—Who lived at Pratt, Kansas, twenty years ago. Any one knowing his whereabouts, please write to Mrs. Harvey Webster, Route 2, Burden, Kansas.

BORGO, NORMA and DOLORES MARY.—Norma was born in 1910 at Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Dolores was born in Bessemer, Michigan, in 1914. I am their father. At one time I was employed in a mine in Utah. In 1921 I got in some trouble and left my wife and two daughters in Salt Lake City. My wife moved to California where she later married a man named Butterworth. Her given name is Sophie Eva. I want so much to hear from my girls. If they see this, please write to James Miller, Sonoma County Hospital, Santa Rosa, California.

OSBORNE, MRS. JOHN.—Was last seen in Boswell, Oklahoma, in 1905. Her maiden name was Carrie Ledger. Any one knowing her, or any of her children, please write to Mrs. J. F. Ballard, Route 1, Kirkland, Texas.

DE SONTE, CARMEL.—Was last seen in August, 1928. Was working for the Ford Motor Car Co. at the time and his address was 1330 Brooklyn Street, Detroit, Michigan. A very good friend of his, named Tony, was then sick in a hospital at Ann Arbor, Michigan; also a friend named Sharie, and another friend who had a sister named Zara. Any one knowing his present address, please advise Z. M., care of Western Story Magazine.

AND TO THINK THEY USED TO CALL ME SKINNY

SKINNY? NEW EASY WAY ADDS POUNDS

—so fast you're amazed

Astonishing gains with new double tonic. Richest imported ale yeast now concentrated 7 times, iron added. Gives 5 to 15 lbs. in a few weeks

NOW there's no need to have people calling you "skinny", and losing all your chances of making friends. Here's a new easy treatment that is giving thousands solid attractive flesh and husky strength—*in just a few weeks!*

You know doctors for years have prescribed yeast to build up health. But now with this new discovery you can get far greater tonic results than with ordinary yeast—regain health, and also put on pounds of firm, handsome flesh—*and in a far shorter time.*

Not only are thousands quickly gaining good-looking pounds, but also clear skin, new pep.

Concentrated 7 times

This amazing new product, Ironized Yeast, is made from specially cultured *brewers' ale yeast* imported from Europe—the richest yeast known—which by a new process is concentrated 7 times—*made 7 times more powerful.*

But that is not all! This super-rich yeast is then *ironized* with 3 kinds of strengthening iron.

Day after day, as you take Ironized Yeast, watch flat chest develop, skinny limbs get husky, skin clear—you're a new person.

Results guaranteed

No matter how skinny and weak you may be, this marvelous new Ironized Yeast should build you up in a few short weeks as it has thousands. If not delighted with the results of the very first package, money back instantly.

Special FREE offer!

To start you building up your health *right away,* we make this FREE offer. Purchase a package of Ironized Yeast at once, cut out the seal on the box and mail it to us with a clipping of this paragraph. We will send you a fascinating new book on health, "New Facts About Your Body", by an authority. Remember, results are guaranteed with the very first package—*or money refunded.* At all good druggists. Ironized Yeast Co., Inc., Dept. 508, Atlanta, Ga.

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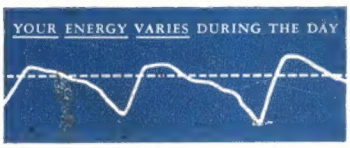
A FACT!

SCIENCE ADVANCES NEW DATA THAT MAY COMPLETELY CHANGE YOUR IDEAS OF CIGARETTES!



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Here's a basic discovery that throws new light on our past knowledge about cigarettes. It embodies an "energizing effect" . . . a quick restoration of the flow of natural body energy . . . a relief from fatigue and irritability. You do "get a lift with a Camel," and it is a pleasure that you can repeat as often as you like—all day long. For Camels never get on your nerves.

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EFFECT IS NATURAL

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You can smoke just as many of these delightful Camels as you want. You can increase your flow of energy over and over again. And remember: *Camel's costlier tobaccos never get on your nerves.*

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Camels are made from finer, MORE EXPENSIVE TOBACCOS—Turkish & Domestic—than any other popular brand.

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